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Pro-drilling forces have a lot to prove

Lowcountry citizens and tourism interests need a stronger voice on proposed oil drilling off the South Carolina coast.

President Barack Obama released Tuesday a draft proposal to make land off our coast available for oil and gas leases for the first time. It would take place under a 5-year plan that could begin in 2017. Seismic testing for oil deposits could start as early as this year.

The proposal's review process includes public input and potential revisions. With Tuesday's announcement, public review of the details -- and informed input -- are already greatly needed.

Pro-drilling forces have a lot to prove.

Citizens need to drill much deeper than the rosy concept that America can wean itself off of oil imports. Is that possible?

And it must see data behind claims that this production would reduce fuel costs to consumers.

South Carolina's leadership -- including the governor, legislature and congressional delegation - - must demand proof that drilling is worth the risk.

The public can easily remember the BP Deepwater Horizon debacle in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010. That risk is clear.

But what about other risks, including the risk to the economy?

Oil drilling is said to be an economic boon, bringing many jobs. What jobs, when and where?

Whatever claims are made, the economic impact needs to be balanced against the existing economy. We're told that coastal fisheries, tourism and recreation amounts to 79,000 jobs and \$4.4 billion annually for South Carolina's economy. That economy is the proven breadbasket for Beaufort County.

Economic factors and the potential environmental degradation must be measured against gains from the drilling. Past estimates show there is very little oil off the South Carolina coast.

Opponents to the drilling say, for America's fossil-fuel appetite, there is less than a 25-day supply of oil and less than a two-month supply of natural gas off the South Atlantic shoreline.

If true, that does not sound like a sensible risk to take.

And we have not heard enough about the onshore impact of the drilling. Much of the public policy, public sentiment and land uses along the coastline is not in sync with industrialization. What would happen to the oil and gas after it is pumped from the ocean floor?

The president's declaration last week is a signal for everyone to pay attention and do their homework.