

February 1, 2015

Offshore drilling would threaten the NC coast

The Obama administration's plan to open the waters off the shores of Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia to offshore drilling puts North Carolina's tourism and other industries at risk. There should be a strong legal and political push to keep oil rigs out of the Atlantic waters.

Environmentalists and some communities on North Carolina's coast will no doubt provide the legal objections. The political response, however, will be a call for drilling to start. North Carolina Gov. Pat McCrory heads a group of Southeastern governors who think offshore drilling will be a financial boon for their states.

McCrory praised the government's offering oil-drilling leases, saying in a statement that development of gas and oil off the coast will create thousands of jobs and generate billions in tax revenue. The earliest an Atlantic oil and gas lease sale could happen would be 2021.

The Democratic governor of Virginia and the mostly Republican congressional delegations of the Southeastern states also are in favor, though the plan does not require approval by Congress.

But the hunt for oil off the coast – the plan puts a 50-mile buffer between the shore and the drilling areas – will put at risk sources of revenue that are already here, tourism, fishing and coastal real estate development. It's better to protect what the state has than risk it for the uncertain prospect of more jobs and revenue.

Given the political clamor for drilling, North Carolina's best protection from it happening may rely on the courts, findings that oil resources off the coast are scarce and a continuation of current low prices for oil. With those three factors involved, the drilling may never come to pass.

President Obama's motivation for supporting offshore drilling is complicated. The clearest reason appears to be that he's offering to open the Atlantic waters to gain support for his other push to close off from drilling millions of acres in Alaska and the waters off its coast.

He's also trying to balance his pro-environment stances – opposition to the Keystone XL Pipeline and support for reductions in greenhouse gas emissions – with the need for plentiful energy supplies.

Given the reality of global warming and the memory of the 2010 Deepwater Horizon spill into the Gulf of Mexico, the time for such balance is past. The United States should be building to an energy future based on renewable sources without environmental hazards. For now, the best hope is that explorers find there isn't enough oil and gas off the Atlantic coast to merit the trouble of extracting it.