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Rally against offshore drilling

South Carolina's coastal communities must form a unified front in opposition to a plan for coastal oil and gas exploration, and the drilling that could follow. It's likely that the coastal region will have to make the case to officials in the remainder of the state as this ill-considered proposal advances. It won't help that Gov. Nikki Haley has given a premature endorsement to the idea.

Gov. Haley, of course, supports economic development as a way to bring jobs to the state, and the oil industry would bring related employment. But other jobs could be at risk if drilling becomes a reality off the South Carolina coast. The state's tourism industry depends on clean beaches and unpolluted coastal waters.

Ocean-drilling doesn't bring those kinds of pretty postcard pictures to mind. But it does generate images of tar balls, networks of pipelines, tank farms and oil tankers. And, in the worst case, mammoth quantities of spilled oil lapping up along the shore.

That's what happened in the Gulf of Mexico following the blowout of the BP Deepwater Horizon well that ended up pumping more than 200 million gallons of oil into the sea in 2010.

Oil industry spokesmen prefer to talk about how companies have become increasingly skilled in preventing that sort of disaster. They make offshore extraction sound like pumping gas into the family car at the corner store. But there is always the risk of human error, and the stakes are too great for South Carolina's coastal region, which already has established its own brand in the tourism market — and its logo is not an offshore oil drilling platform.

So far, the towns of Edisto Island, Beaufort and Port Royal have spoken out against the idea, and other local jurisdictions are preparing to consider similar resolutions against offshore drilling. They include the city of Charleston, Isle of Palms and Folly Beach.

In his article on Friday, reporter Bo Petersen pointed out that the drilling would likely be done along the continental shelf where it could threaten the rich marine habitat created by the vast coral reef there. The story cited the opposition of state Sen. Chip Campsen, R-Isle of Palms, who is a conservationist and hunter, and whose district encompasses local beach communities.

More people would oppose the idea of offshore drilling, Sen. Campsen said, if they were aware of the "very dirty, very industrial" infrastructure that is necessary for its development.

So far, Sen. Campsen is one of the few South Carolina legislators to oppose the idea of offshore drilling, but he is not alone. Mayors Joe Riley of Charleston and Billy Keyserling of Beaufort also have spoken out against it. Given the stakes, there should be more.

Public hearings are scheduled in Mount Pleasant in March and North Charleston in April as part of the federal permitting process.

Officials in coastal jurisdictions should make their voices heard, so their counterparts at the state level won't have any doubt about where the region stands on the issue.

Solely from a development standpoint, tourism has provided the coastal region and the state an economic bounty in jobs and tax revenues. Why risk it by opening the door to an industry that is incompatible with what the region has worked so hard to create and sustain? In some cases, "can't" should be an option.