

March 10, 2015

Editorial: Seismic testing, drilling aren't worth the risk

Saturday marchers and officials from Northeast Florida converged on St. Augustine to protest President Obama's opening of the mid-Atlantic states to offshore seismic testing and drilling for both oil and natural gas.

Environmentally each represents an ecological issue in itself. But in practice if the seismic testing demonstrates pockets of oil or gas upon which drilling companies choose to speculate, they're one in the same, with the result being a lot of potential damage and very little actual energy coming up from the bottom.

The drilling area runs from roughly Delaware to Cape Canaveral. Including the offshore area, it's about the size of California.

The U.S. Bureau of Energy Management estimates that the total potential for gas and oil drilling in this large area amounts to between 4 percent for oil and 8 percent for gas, of the total resources in U.S. federal waters.

That total amount of energy resources, according to Department of Interior estimates, would keep the U.S. in oil for 61 days and gas for two years. And there's no guarantee that the drilling will pan out at all. Five wells have been drilled in this section of the Atlantic in the past — the last in 1962. All were abandoned. The oil industry says that drilling techniques have vastly improved over the intervening years, and that may be true. But Cuba has put down four wells as recently as 2012, and all were found to be uneconomical, and have been capped.

But the act of drilling, even over areas that prove not to be financially feasible, can still be environmentally dangerous. The seismic testing angle is separate. While oil industry execs and environmentalists trade data back and forth on the dangers of the big boom on sea life, it's interesting that the oil industry has agreed not to test along the migration routes of right whales. And truly, we know of inshore migration routes because we can see the whales. Who is to say that others don't migrate much farther offshore. And who would know in order to stop the acoustic assault?

Truth is, it all remains a big question mark. But the feared damage from seismic testing isn't only on right whales, though they get a lot of the eco-press — think real big manatees. Recently the U.S. government concluded that there would be "minor to negligible" impact on most wildlife ... "with the exception of sea turtles and marine mammals."

Exception duly noted.

The environmentalists have data of their own. They say that oil and gas development in the Mid-Atlantic would risk 1.4 million jobs and \$95 billion in Gross Domestic Products derived from the sea. In Florida alone, the estimate is for the loss of 281,000 jobs and \$36 billion in lost GDP.

It's great that St. Augustine took center stage on an issue with so much potential to damage our oceans, economy and, in our city's case, a lot of heritage as well. The economic upside of drilling, forgetting the environmental dangers, simply does not outweigh the downside. Together, they're a one-two punch of threat.