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Editorial: Crude Oil Doesn't Fit in Tourism Economy

It's perfectly obvious to many people that pumping crude oil offshore in the Atlantic Ocean is not a good match for a tourism economy so it's troubling that local governments did not speak out for the environment – and the area economic mainstay – when they had an opportunity.

The cities of Myrtle Beach and North Myrtle Beach, the towns of Surfside Beach and Atlantic Beach and Horry County government should have joined 20 communities in the Carolinas, including Charleston, and gone on record against offshore oil production. The U.S. Bureau of Ocean Energy Management received thousands of comments.

Instead, elected officials in the Coastal Alliance, which includes Horry County and coastal municipality leaders, say they will take a wait-and-see approach on seismic testing and offshore drilling. Wait and see what?

Supporters of offshore drilling, including Gov. Nikki Haley and U.S. Rep. Tom Rice, point out the economic benefits (jobs and new revenue) from offshore oil production. Opponents voice concerns about a disaster such as the Deepwater Horizon explosion in 2010 and its devastating impact on ocean fish and wildlife, beaches and wetlands.

Taylor Damonte of the Clay Brittain Jr. Center for Resort Tourism at Coastal Carolina University tracks occupancy rates, an important economic indicator. Oil spills are among the factors (along with weather, prices, advertising, etc.) impacting lodging demand, Damonte notes. The 2010 Gulf of Mexico disaster helped Grand Strand vacation occupancy rates. The opposite likely would be the case with an oil spill here – tourists would go to the Gulf Coast instead of here.

“No one wants to see oil spills, but we're not at that point,” Surfside Beach Mayor Doug Samples notes in explaining his position that it's too soon to take a position for or against drilling. That may be, but it is not too soon to be on record for the protection of the environment and the economy.

Proponents of offshore oil production may have fallen behind the curve. A few years ago, the U.S. was much closer to needing Atlantic Ocean crude oil. Fracking, the controversial method of extracting oil from shale, has greatly increased U.S. oil production, to the point of having more oil than storage tanks. New, massive natural gas discoveries also suggest that there is much more time to potentially develop offshore oil production.

Offshore energy from ocean winds and the eventual need for producing potable water from the ocean are also factors. Clean electrical power would go directly, via under-ocean cables, from offshore wind turbines into the power grid.

Oil would have to be transported ashore and then to a refinery and Horry County is some distance from a refinery.

Potable water and clean electricity from offshore winds, in addition to many valid environmental concerns, should trump discussion of offshore oil.

At a Coastal Alliance meeting, County Council Chairman Mark Lazarus spoke about potential to concerns about damage to fisheries. “Scientists say it could have a negative impact on fish ... but that’s just scientific.” [Our emphasis.] “There’s no hard evidence. ... We will continue to listen to the debate.”

The science is the key to that “hard evidence” and any debate must include attention to scientific research.

Another key to the debate: remembering that the ocean environment and tourism are inextricably entwined.