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Editorial: Don't Get Too Gung-Ho About Offshore Drilling

A recent federal government decision to endorse testing for oil and natural gas along the Atlantic Ocean means the door could once again be opening for drilling off South Carolina's coast.

Earlier this year, the U.S. Department of the Interior recommended seismic testing along the Carolinas, as well as Virginia and potentially down to Florida. Each state, including the Palmetto State, faces a dilemma after the agency's decision. While drilling offshore could mean a boom in jobs, it also presents potentially dire environmental consequences.

Even the seismic testing endorsed by the federal government has stirred concerns since it requires loud air-gun blasts that, according to environmentalists, can disrupt the sea's ecosystem. While protecting marine life is important, it's also vital to collect modern data before we do even greater environmental harm that could result from drilling mishaps. The Gulf Coast spill in 2010 should still loom large in our collective memory.

During a S.C. House Natural Resources Committee meeting earlier this year, Dr. James Knapp, a professor of earth and ocean sciences at the University of South Carolina, told legislators that he did not believe such seismic testing hurts fish and other sea life. He also rightly noted that present data about our oil reserves off the coast are largely outdated. Relevant research is decades old since the entire East Coast has been off limits from all drilling-related activity since 1981.

The Interior Department did estimate in 2010 that about 2 billion barrels could exist off the Atlantic. While drilling advocates argue oil and natural gas extraction off our coast could generate thousands of jobs and billions of dollars in revenue, it's wise to keep in mind that such an estimate of 2 billion barrels equals only about 100 days of oil at the country's current consumption rate, according to Newsweek. A large-scale environmental disaster is a high price to pay for such a limited supply of energy.

Drilling proponents say lower energy prices and greater energy independence could be the result of exploring the Atlantic Coast, but our lawmakers shouldn't minimize those very real environmental concerns.

Our state's natural resources, particularly our beautiful beaches, are largely considered our greatest economic driver through tourism dollars. Let's not lose sight of protecting that priceless asset merely for short-lived economic benefits.