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Tread carefully with offshore drilling plans in NC

Gov. Pat McCrory says a federal prohibition on oil and gas drilling within 50 nautical miles of the North Carolina coast “unnecessarily puts much of North Carolina’s most accessible undiscovered resources under lock and key.”

What about the coast’s most accessible discovered resources, the magnificent beaches that have made the Outer Banks an attraction for residents and visitors alike? What happens if — given recent experience, that might be better phrased as “when” — the beaches and the seabirds are covered in oil?

The proposed rule, besides lessening the chance that any oil spill will reach shore, provides a zone closer to land for wind farms. “One of the reasons we proposed a 50-mile buffer is to allow an area for renewable energy,” Abigail Ross Hopper, director of the federal Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, said at the annual State Energy Conference in Raleigh.

Without the buffer, drilling could be allowed anywhere beyond state waters, typically three miles from shore.

“It makes sense for each (type of energy) to have its own space to develop,” Hopper said.

That it does. After all, the title of this year’s conference, held at North Carolina State University, was “Think and Do: Mapping a Sustainable Future for Energy in North Carolina.” That means gradually weaning ourselves from reliance on fossil fuels.

There were 25 different sessions and more than 75 speakers. Sponsors ranged from the N.C. Sustainable Energy Association (NCSEA) to Duke Energy.

“By bringing together all professionals in the clean energy community, NCSEA facilitates discussions about the clean energy issues confronting our state, our businesses and our ability to create energy solutions that are sustainable and affordable,” the organization says.

“Oil, gas and nuclear” was only one of nine areas of interest during the two-day event. Others included research and entrepreneurship; envisioning the future energy system; solar, wind, biomass; smart grid and infrastructure.

The state apparently is getting a lot of attention from the oil and gas industry. “North Carolina is in the running for the state that requires the most attention after Alaska,” Hopper said. “That may or may not be a welcome moniker but we are happy to have you in the running.”

We’re not exactly thrilled, given what has happened to beaches off California, Alaska and in the Gulf of Mexico. However, no matter how popular North Carolina may be with the drillers, it would be a long time before anything happens.

Auctioning for leases would not happen before 2021 at the earliest, and those leases would authorize only exploration. Separate approval would be required for production drilling. By comparison, auctions for wind-farm development could be held as early as next year.

No one can predict the energy situation in 2021. It depends on too many variables, not the least of which is Middle East politics. If the world is as awash in oil as it is today, there may be no takers for the leases.

What we do know is that recklessly chasing after fossil fuel sources, regardless of the environmental damage the chase may entail, is a fool's game. Fossil fuels eventually will be exhausted, and what have we gained if by that time we have ravaged the planet?

We cannot stop using fossil fuels in the near future. But we need a broad-based program to reduce steadily our reliance on such fuels. Nuclear power at one point seemed to be the answer, but catastrophic accidents and ever-rising prices have dimmed its appeal.

That leaves renewables such as solar, wind and biomass. Aggressive pursuit of all of them seems to be our best long-range solution.

Endangering North Carolina's shoreline, by contrast, should be low on the list, if not off the list entirely.