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Stop offshore seismic testing

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Supporters of offshore drilling generally contend that testing is a harmless first step to determine if there are enough oil and gas reserves to justify ending the moratorium on drilling off the Atlantic coast.

But serious questions have been raised about whether the use of repeated seismic blasts is really safe for marine life, which constitute a natural and commercial resource.

First District Rep. Mark Sanford, R-S.C., and 32 other House members largely representing coastal districts are reasonably demanding some answers.

As Rep. Sanford and his colleagues said this week in a letter to the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, “Seismic airgun exploration is an enormously disruptive activity in the ocean. A significant body of peer-reviewed science demonstrates that seismic airgun testing results in massive displacement of fish, causes catch rates of some commercial fish to plummet, and disrupts vital feeding and breeding behaviors in endangered whales.”

Indeed, the BOEM itself concluded that seismic tests could injure about 138,000 marine animals and disrupt the migration, feeding or other behavior of perhaps 13.6 million.

That includes North American right whales (there are only about 500 right whales living today), humpback whales, dolphins, loggerheads and other sea turtles and commercial fish.

Mr. Sanford and his colleagues noted that leading marine scientists oppose seismic testing, and that the Mid-Atlantic and South Atlantic Fishery Management Councils, which help make national ocean policy, have taken formal positions against seismic testing.

The congressmen pointed out that each company interested in oil exploration will be allowed to conduct its own tests, thereby multiplying any ill effects. Further, that information will be proprietary and can't be reviewed by the public.

And the public has a major stake in the use, and misuse, of offshore resources.

Coastal opposition to seismic testing and drilling continues to grow. In South Carolina alone, virtually every coastal jurisdiction has supported resolutions in opposition to drilling and to seismic testing.

Why conduct potentially harmful tests using seismic blasts if offshore drilling is a bad idea in the first place? It certainly would be a bad idea for South Carolina.

Offshore drilling threatens the state's coastal resources — and its tourism economy — with everyday pollution from leaks and tarballs, and the possibility of a catastrophic oil spill.

Despite the happy face painted by the oil industry on its offshore drilling proposal, the risks are real and potentially gargantuan.

At the least, the BOEM should accede to the requests for additional review of the seismic testing proposed for the Atlantic coast. Meanwhile, elected state officials should acknowledge the risk that offshore drilling poses to South Carolina, and get on board with Rep. Sanford and his colleagues.

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