

Editorial: Those mythical 25,000 offshore drilling jobs

NOBODY seriously believes that offshore drilling will bring 25,000 jobs to Hampton Roads. The source of that number is the American Petroleum Institute, not exactly a disinterested source.

That hasn't stopped politicians from repeating that number like a promise.

"We can grow our local and national economies and create 25,000 good-paying jobs for Virginians if we properly leverage our offshore resources," U.S. Rep. Scott Rigell said at the beginning of the year.

Some variation of that number is behind the support for offshore drilling by current Gov. Terry McAuliffe, and former Govs. Bob McDonnell, Tim Kaine, Mark Warner, Jim Gilmore and George Allen, a few of whom backed drilling when they got to the U.S. Senate.

But along with the possibility of royalty riches (Washington is unlikely to approve those) or a map that doesn't cheat the commonwealth (which representatives and senators have tried to change for more than a decade), the 25,000 new jobs have always been a phantom. A mirage.

Common sense says that jobs on platforms off the coast have no necessary tie to the shore. Just ask the communities of the Gulf coast, which rig workers fly over on the way inland.

In any case, if API's numbers were self-serving (they were produced along with the National Ocean Industries Association), they also didn't tell the full story.

A new report prepared for the Southern Environmental Law Center makes clear that the new jobs API found could imperil thousands of other jobs tied to an unsullied coast: Tourism and fishing, among others.

The SELC's agenda is articulated here: "SELC uses the power of the law to champion all the things you love about the South: clean water, healthy air, mountains, forests, rural countryside, and the coast. By working at the national, regional, state, and local levels and in all three branches of government, this organization is able to do what it takes to get results. We strengthen laws, we make government agencies do their job, and, when necessary, we go to court to stop environmental abuses or to set far-reaching precedents."

In other words, SELC's bias is to protect the environment. API's is to boost the oil and gas industry. API's study said offshore drilling could produce 121,000 new jobs in Virginia, the Carolinas and Georgia. But in North and South Carolina and Georgia, most coastal communities oppose drilling.

"But citing Bureau of Labor Statistics data, the [SELC] report ... noted that 249,000 people already are employed in 'ocean-related' jobs in the four states. It said a degrading of the coastline's health by oil and gas industry mishaps could threaten the livelihoods of many," reported The Pilot's Dave Mayfield.

To pick an example closer to home, and unmentioned in the SELC report: The Pentagon, for a decade now, has said quite specifically that platforms off Virginia's coast would threaten its training mission: "Lease Sale 220 area should have no oil or gas activity due to our intensive training and testing in the area and the danger this would present to oil and gas industry personnel and property."

According to aides on Capitol Hill, that official position has not changed.

If the Pentagon can't train pilots off Virginia's coast, that could endanger thousands of Navy jobs. Aircraft carrier group jobs. Pilot jobs. Support staff jobs.

And that's if nothing goes wrong. If something goes wrong, it could decimate the tourism industry. Jobs at Oceanfront hotels. Jobs at restaurants. Jobs in transportation. It would, as it did in the Gulf of Mexico after the Deepwater Horizon spill in 2010, devastate Virginia's offshore fisheries.

Heaven knows how many jobs that might be, but it's certainly far more than API's study promised.

http://www.pilotonline.com/opinion/editorial/editorial-those-mythical-offshore-drilling-jobs/article_49a19138-efa7-5dd8-a538-59f5f9867536.html