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Offshore oil not right for S.C.

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Tourism is booming in South Carolina with a third record-breaking year demonstrating its continued strength as one of the state's leading industries. Though centered along the coastal region, tourism has statewide economic benefits.

One in 10 South Carolinians is employed by the tourism industry, and the overall economic impact was \$19.1 billion in 2014, the most recent year for which figures are available.

Those figures, from Duane Parrish, director of the state's Parks, Recreation and Tourism Department, represent a 5.5 percent increase over the previous year.

"It enhances our quality of life," Mr. Parrish said during a recent meeting of tourism officials in Charleston. "And it has a tremendous impact on the rest of our state's economy."

Of course, the health of tourism is closely related to the health of the state's beaches and other public, coastal resources. So why do state officials, including Gov. Nikki Haley continue to push

for offshore drilling for oil and natural gas, that could jeopardize the health of the state's tourism industry?

So far, there's been no good answer to that question.

Certainly, elected officials in towns from North Myrtle Beach to Hilton Head oppose offshore drilling, which would pose a continual threat of pollution to the state's beaches. Twenty-two elected municipal and county boards have opposed the Obama administration's plan to open up the Atlantic coast to drilling.

So have the state's three House members who represent coastal districts: 1st District Rep. Mark Sanford, R-Charleston, 6th District Rep. Jim Clyburn, D-Columbia, and 7th District Rep. Tom Rice, R-Myrtle Beach.

Given the opposition of coastal officials, it seems remarkable that the governor and the remainder of the congressional delegation continue to support such an ill-considered plan, having limited benefits to South Carolina.

And it is a plan with substantial risks.

There's the hazard of a major spill, as was experienced in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010 with the BP blowout that fouled beaches in five states. But there is also the pollution from the day-to-day operation of oil rigs, caused by leakage and spills.

That, too, fouls beaches and damages habitat.

But more than drilling endangers the habitat for marine life offshore. Ocean testing for the possible presence of oil and natural gas requires the repeated use of loud blasts from seismic air guns, which especially threaten the well-being of endangered whales and other marine mammals.

Regarding the latest tourism data, Mr. Parrish said: "It's striking that economic indicators for tourism ... are up across the board, showing significant levels of growth over previous years. The recent performance of our industry is unprecedented in South Carolina's history and points to an exciting future."

That future will be clouded if federal officials permit drilling off South Carolina's coast.

The state's leaders should recognize the risk and oppose as one the administration's plan to lift the moratorium.

With a decision from federal officials expected in mid-March, it's past time for Gov. Haley to reject this ill-advised change in federal policy.

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