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People's voice helped reverse plan for drilling off Atlantic coast

Interior Department secretary says local protests helped convince officials to drop proposal for offshore oil and gas drilling.



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BY THE EDITORIAL BOARD

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The Obama administration's decision to abandon plans for oil and gas drilling off the Atlantic coast brought joy and relief along North Carolina's coast Tuesday.

Towns that depend on tourism need no longer worry about the kind of disaster that hit the Gulf Coast in 2010 following the explosion and sinking of the Deepwater Horizon oil rig. Yet it was that worrying in the form of objections from

the military and petitions and resolutions from coastal communities that drove away the prospect of oil rigs looming off the coast.

The surprising decision puts Gov. Pat McCrory in an awkward position as he seeks re-election. McCrory has pushed hard for offshore drilling despite the local opposition. Now it looks like the president has done a better job than the governor of responding to the environmental and economic concerns of North Carolina's coastal residents.

U.S. Interior Department Secretary Sally Jewell said her department reversed its earlier commitment to offer drilling lease sales in response to opposition. Many coastal residents and their local leaders stressed that the gain from offshore drilling would also bring a threat to tourism, real estate and the environment. Meanwhile, the Pentagon said drilling could interfere with planes and ships engaged in live training.

“When you factor in conflicts with national defense, economic activities such as fishing and tourism, and opposition from many local communities, it simply doesn't make sense to move forward with lease sales in the coming five years,” Jewell said.

Actually, it never did make sense.

Opening the mid-Atlantic coast to oil and gas drilling directly contradicted the Obama administration's commitment to limit climate change by reducing the burning of fossil fuels. It also jeopardized tourism and the delicate ecosystems of the Pamlico Sound, the Outer Banks and the coasts of other states without a benefit to local economies that would justify the risk. Finally, hydraulic fracturing in the U.S. and the resumption of international oil sales by Iran have created an oil and gas glut that appears likely to last.

Jack Gerard, CEO of the American Petroleum Institute, said the administration's decision “appeases extremists.” But on the Outer Banks, the change brought relief and a bit of disbelief that local protests had swayed a national decision.

“It's a great illustration of how they were actually listening to the people,” said Kill Devil Hills Mayor Sheila Davies. “It's a little surreal at this point. In a few more days maybe it will sink in a little bit.”

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