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Editorial: Wise retreat on offshore drilling

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THERE ARE all kinds of reasons the petroleum industry should be barred from the Atlantic Ocean off Virginia:

- Offshore drilling poses an obvious risk to military operations and to tourism, Hampton Roads' biggest economic drivers.
- No federal structure is in place that would accrue any royalties to Virginia, and there's little chance Congress would approve one.
- The offshore territory maps shortchange the commonwealth, and Capitol Hill has no appetite to redraw them.
- America's coastal communities on the Atlantic Ocean, almost to a town, oppose petroleum production off their beaches.
- Any spill would imperil the marine environment, both on- and offshore, as demonstrated by the 2010 Deepwater Horizon spill in the Gulf of Mexico.
- Oil and gas drilling will incrementally worsen global warming, a primary driver of sea-level rise, a particular threat to Hampton Roads.

The case for drilling offshore of Virginia was buttressed only by the industry's fiction of 25,000 jobs, a self-interested fantasy unconfirmed by any independent source and contradicted by environmentalists.

On Tuesday, the administration of President Barack Obama reversed course and barred oil and gas drilling from the Atlantic off the East Coast. It was a major victory for Hampton Roads, which would've been asked to risk its economic health, for the cause of military readiness, for the region's tourism and fisheries industries and for a clean environment.

The framework issued Tuesday reversed the Interior Department's initial plan to auction off leases for millions of acres in the Atlantic Ocean starting in 2021. New leases will be added off Alaska and in the Gulf of Mexico, but a moratorium remains on East Coast drilling.

The petroleum industry's phantom promise of bountiful jobs and economic development had been enough to persuade Virginia politicians of every stripe and party to lead the industry's cheers, including the past six governors and most of the gerrymandered congressional delegation.

It put those politicians at clear odds with the people who would have to live with the consequences of a new and dirty industry on Virginia's shores, as well the Pentagon, which has been warning for a decade that oil and gas drilling are incompatible with its training mission off the coast.

Training over the Virginia Capes is one of the primary reasons Oceana Naval Air Station remains in Virginia Beach; pointing that out merely makes political support for oil and gas drilling inexplicable. It's not like the Pentagon's position was secret or new.

Ten years ago, a military review concluded that “[a]ny structures built in the water where these types of activities are conducted, particularly low-level gunnery practice and missile separation testing, would restrict where military air wings can fire their weapons, drive aircraft further away from the coast, increase fuel costs and wear and tear on the airframes, increase flight times en-route to training areas, and increase the risk to aircrews due to the increased distance from emergency recovery bases.”

In 2010, the Department of Defense reiterated that stance: “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.”

NASA, too, had objected to the prospect of platforms off Virginia, as have coastal-protection advocates and municipal officials too numerous to count. In the end, the din of opposition was impossible to ignore.

“This decision reflects a host of reasons not to open the Atlantic to drilling, including the intense opposition from local communities, concerns from the Department of Defense about how drilling would impact military activities, and a different economic and energy outlook,” Sierra Weaver, senior attorney for the Southern Environmental Law Center, said in a statement.

On Tuesday, the president’s administration balanced the risks and benefits of offshore drilling and concluded the dangers made drilling a bad idea. It’s past time for Virginia’s leaders to recognize that and do the same.

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