



Our View: Halting offshore drilling plan a wise move

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The Obama administration decision to drop plans for oil and gas drilling off our coast is neither a major setback nor a dramatic victory.

For both sides of the contentious issue, it's a bump in the road, one more twist in a decades-long tale.

There were three basic reasons for backing away from exploration along the southeast Atlantic coast, said Interior Secretary Sally Jewell on Tuesday: widespread opposition from coastal communities, military concerns about drilling near some of its largest coastal installations, and simple economics - we don't need the oil now.

But a decision like this in the final year of the Obama presidency doesn't necessarily set long-term policy. The next president can reverse it, if he or she believes it's in the nation's best interest.

Gov. Pat McCrory chairs the Outer Continental Shelf Governors Coalition, a group that has pushed for oil exploration off the coasts of Virginia, North and South Carolina, Georgia and Florida. He quickly slammed the decision, saying it would cost this state thousands of new jobs and revenue that would support schools, infrastructure, dredging and beach nourishment.

That's wishful thinking. Anyone who fills a gas tank knows we've got plenty of petroleum available today - so much that prices have dropped dramatically over the past two years. They've risen recently, but only a bit. Even amateur economists understand what happens when supply is high and demand is dropping - precisely the case around the world. If the government opened up

areas off our coast for exploration tomorrow, it would likely be decades before petroleum companies would find it economically feasible to drill. Much simpler, at this point, to reopen the thousands of fracking wells that have been shut down in response to the glut of oil and gas they produced.

Offshore drilling is not a risk-free venture. The vagaries of weather, undersea terrain and human error are always there. That's what led more than 100 coastal communities and the owners of more than 1,000 businesses along the Atlantic shore to urge the government to drop oil-drilling plans.

The Interior Department estimates there are 3.3 billion barrels of recoverable petroleum and more than 31 billion cubic feet of natural gas under the southeast Atlantic floor. Some people in the energy industry believe those estimates are low.

It's reassuring to know it's there if we need it. But we don't. Demand may increase sharply in the years ahead, in which case the reward may outweigh the risk. But today, it doesn't. Halting the drilling plan was the right thing to do.

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