

## Our view: Why the offshore drilling decision matters



Opponents of opening waters off the Carolinas coast to exploration for oil and natural gas hold signs on Wednesday, March 11, 2015 in Mount Pleasant, S.C. They were standing outside a motel where the federal Bureau of Ocean Energy Management held a meeting to take public comment on opening areas to drilling. The agency was to use the comments in deciding what should be included in environmental studies of the proposal. **Bruce Smith** AP Photo

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### *The Editorial Board*

Ideally, we hope the Obama administration's turn against offshore oil and gas drilling in our area means that the "little people" have power.

More than 100 communities along the Atlantic coastline formally objected to Obama's decision in January 2015 to open up the East Coast to oil and gas exploration. Among the first to object was the city of Beaufort, led by Mayor Billy Keyserling. And while the Pentagon also had objections, most of the pushback came from local governments

standing up to the big guns of U.S. senators, members of Congress and governors. Not to mention the deep pockets of Big Oil.

U.S. Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewel said, “We heard from many corners that now is not the time to offer oil and gas leasing off the Atlantic coast. 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.”

That statement is a big relief.

Proponents never told us what the drilling could mean to shoreline communities in terms of dirty, onshore industry support.

We were never told what revenue it would bring to the state. No revenue-sharing plan with the states was established, so it was impossible to measure the potential risks against potential rewards. And with millions of gallons of oil spilled into the Gulf of Mexico in the 2010 Deepwater Horizon explosion, no one along the Atlantic Coast was willing to tolerate the stance of “trust me” coming from Big Oil and powerful politicians.

The strong-armed federal agenda left the people in the dark on many other matters.

The worst of it is the environmentally damaging seismic blasting in search of oil and gas deposits. The testing results would not be released to the public, so again there would be no way to weigh risks and rewards.

But we did know that scores of leading marine scientists oppose seismic testing. So clear is its danger to wildlife that more than 30 congressmen, including Rep. Mark Sanford of this district, demanded answers from the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management.

And we know that oil exploration and drilling are threats to the fisheries, tourism industry and quality of life along the Atlantic coastline.

And we know that existing studies show that the energy deposits off the South Carolina shore represent mere days of America’s consumption — debunking the shallow claim that this exploration would contribute to lower fuel costs and energy independence.

For many reasons, the change of mind by the Obama administration is reason to celebrate.

But if dirty industry is kept at bay — as it was in Beaufort County in 1970 when a proposed BASF chemical plant was blocked from the pristine waters of the Port Royal

Sound estuary — the buck stops with us. We, the people enjoying the Lowcountry, are the heavy industry. It is up to us to fight more fights like this one. They arise daily, and they don't often involve Big Oil. They usually involve the state legislature, or governments closer to home, accommodating ceaseless development that threatens natural resources.

Ideally, we can see in the offshore drilling episode a shaft of hope that enough pushback can come from the grassroots to actually make a difference.

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