

## **Florida should challenge Interior Department's oil, gas exploration plan**

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The U.S. Interior Department is about to open up a portion of the Atlantic Ocean to oil and gas exploration after shutting that door in the 1980s.

While there is a ban on actual drilling in the Atlantic until 2017, Interior's move is clearly a prelude to new drilling, which is troubling in light of the Obama administration's admirable efforts to reduce fossil-fuel consumption to combat climate change.

Florida fought hard for that drilling moratorium, and it should fight Interior's new survey plan, too. The Eastern Seaboard area to be opened to seismic surveys for oil and gas ranges from Delaware to Cape Canaveral. Environmental groups are opposed, saying the testing, which involves underwater explosions, will harm sea life, particularly whales and dolphins. The intense noise of the explosions could kill them, the opponents say. Compressed air guns creating repeated bursts of sound as loud as a howitzer are used beneath the sea, often for long periods of time.

But the jury is out on just how injurious the blasting is for dolphins and whales. Scientists disagree on whether the loud, repetitive underwater noises are lethal, but most do agree that the blasts could alter sea mammals' long-term behavior, affecting their migration patterns, mating habits and even how they communicate with each other. There are 34 species of whales and dolphins, including six whale species that are endangered, in the proposed survey area.

Florida should oppose the survey plan for other reasons, as well. It has long supported drilling bans off both coasts because of the pollution threat to water quality and our tourist-luring beaches. Just think back to the 2010 BP Deepwater Horizon oil rig disaster in the Gulf of Mexico that tarred beaches, contaminated fisheries and killed all manner of sea life. Many coastal businesses were harmed and ultimately received damage payments from BP.

Apparently, Interior's goal is to further wean the country off imported oil by eventually tapping into an estimated 3.3 billion barrels of oil and 312 trillion cubic feet of natural gas in the Atlantic. But there is another, better way to reduce U.S. foreign oil consumption — using less of it. We need more development of practical renewable energy sources, more conservation measures like continuing to improve vehicles' and power plants' fuel efficiency, as well as making businesses, government offices and private homes more energy efficient.

One significant benefit of President Obama's push to curtail the emissions that cause climate change is that he has ordered tougher fuel-efficiency standards for heavy-duty trucks, something many shippers support. Tougher standards mean less fuel consumed.

The Atlantic oil-and-gas exploration plan flies in the face of this administration's push to reduce emissions that are heating up the planet (and its oceans). Global warming and sea-level rise are direct threats to Florida's long-term economy.

Many coastal communities in South Florida are finally beginning to take steps to prepare for the inevitable rise in Atlantic and Gulf waters. Unfortunately, there are no similar actions in Tallahassee, which should be leading the charge on combating the Interior fossil-fuel survey plan. Opening up the waters to eventual oil and gas drilling off our East Coast should be considered a real economic and environmental threat to the well-being of the Sunshine State.

Read more here: <http://www.miamiherald.com/2014/03/06/3978727/dont-drill-baby.html#storylink=cpy>