

The Post and Courier

Winner of the Pulitzer Prize

No oil drilling, no testing offshore S.C.

Apr 3 2016

More than 20 communities up and down the South Carolina coast have said they don't want offshore drilling and the harm it could bring to the billion-dollar tourism industry.

Conservationists, recognizing the tremendous cost an oil spill could have on marine life, are opposed to offshore drilling.

And even the federal Bureau of Ocean Energy Management has said no to drilling off South Carolina's coast.

But none of that matters to three oil-related businesses, which earlier received DHEC approval to do seismic testing offshore for oil and natural gas. They are moving ahead with their testing plans despite what the feds have said about drilling.

Or at least the companies are trying to. The South Carolina Environmental Law Project is challenging the testing permits issued by DHEC in the state's Administrative Law Court.

And opponents continue to try to dissuade state leaders, including Gov. Nikki Haley, to change their "drill, baby, drill" stance in favor of protecting the coast and listening to the residents who would be impacted.

Clearly, the offshore testing companies are banking on BOEM to change its mind. But if offshore drilling is a mistake now, it will be a mistake next year and the next.

BOEM has even concluded that the work "may result in low immediate economic benefits for nearby communities."

Still, politicians in the Upstate and in the Midlands maintain that oil dollars and jobs would flood in to a state that needs more money. And they buy Big Oil's promises that drilling is now just about foolproof, where devastating blowouts and leaks are concerned.

Even if that were true — and it's not — apologists do not talk about the other problems for ocean communities that the industry creates, from the inevitable tar balls on the beach to the imposing, ugly infrastructure on land.

It is telling when a federal agency is more responsive to the people of South Carolina than the state's governor and many of its elected officials.

If the General Assembly were to tell BOEM that neither offshore drilling nor offshore testing is welcome near South Carolina, the message might make a big difference in D.C. Certainly that was the message that coastal communities sent to state and federal leaders. They opposed both exploration and drilling, citing the former's hazard to marine life.

Seismic testing involves high-decibel blasts from air guns underwater that sound roughly every 16 seconds. It has been found to disrupt the feeding and mating of mammals and fish.

Testing could also require drilling test wells, and that means risks of spills and leaks.

Why risk a spill in order to get data that can't be used?

South Carolina officials should reject plans for offshore seismic testing, which would only be meaningful had oil companies been given the go-ahead for offshore drilling.

Fortunately, conservation groups, including the South Carolina Environmental Law Project, the Southern Environmental Law Center, Oceana and the Coastal Conservation League, continue to work on behalf of the coast and marine life.

And no coastal communities have withdrawn their objection to offshore testing and drilling.

South Carolina's leadership should reverse its support for offshore drilling.

As Sierra Weaver, senior attorney for the Environmental Law Center, said, "It doesn't matter how much oil is out there. The beaches are worth so much more."

<http://www.postandcourier.com/article/20160403/PC1002/160409813/1022/-no-oil-drilling-no-testing-offshore-sc>