

Stop offshore seismic testing

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It has been three months since the federal Bureau of Ocean Energy Management halted plans to allow drilling off the Atlantic shore in response to protests from communities up and down the coast — including those in our state.

Now it should heed the opposition to seismic testing for oil and natural gas deposits offshore, again recognizing the opposition from coastal residents, and a growing number of their representatives in Congress.

First District Rep. Mark Sanford, R-S.C., Sixth District Rep. James Clyburn, D-S.C., and 53 other congressmen have asked President Barack Obama to suspend federal plans for seismic mapping of the continental shelf.

As Rep. Sanford remarked, coastal communities along the Atlantic seaboard have rejected offshore oil exploration, so it makes no sense to continue seismic mapping to assist future oil exploration where it isn't wanted.

“If one is not going to do something,” he said, it is not reasonable “to prepare to do that something.”

The Atlantic continental shelf is now off the list of areas where the Interior Department may issue leases for oil extraction between now and 2022.

But the ban is only temporary, and the region could be reopened for oil exploration and development by a later federal administration. To further explore the region's suitability for offshore oil production, BOEM plans to go ahead with permits for seismic testing using power airguns.

That's a bad idea. As the lawmakers' letter to the president states, "Seismic airgun blasting for oil and natural gas is an extremely disruptive activity in the ocean.

"A significant body of peer-reviewed science demonstrates that seismic airgun blasting can cause the catch rates of some commercial fish species to plummet, displace fish over large areas, and broadly disrupt the feeding and breeding behaviors of whales and other marine life."

"Last year, a group of 75 marine scientists sharply criticized the administration's 2014 decision, to introduce seismic surveys to the Atlantic and cautioned that impacts on the region's fish and marine mammal populations would be 'significant, long-lasting, and widespread.'"

Particularly at risk is the North Atlantic right whale, one of the world's most endangered marine mammals.

The Interior Department should follow its solid decision on offshore drilling and abandon its plans to license seismic testing on the Atlantic continental shelf using airgun technology.

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