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Stand firm against offshore oil

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In this April 21, 2010, file photo, the Deepwater Horizon oil rig burns in the Gulf of Mexico, more than 50 miles southeast of Venice, La. (AP Photo/Gerald Herbert, File)

When President Obama considered opening the Atlantic Coast to offshore oil exploration, he rightly got an earful from concerned coastal communities. Now that President Trump has brashly begun work on an early do-over of Mr. Obama's plan, he should expect the same.

Indeed, given the universal coastal opposition to Mr. Obama's plan, one wonders why the Trump administration is venturing again into those chilly waters.

Mr. Obama's five-year National Outer Continental Shelf Oil and Gas Leasing Program runs from 2017-2022 and does not allow for oil drilling on the Atlantic Coast. In December, he also permanently barred oil drilling in North Atlantic waters under the 1953 Outer Continental Shelf Lands Act.

Those protections were implemented almost entirely thanks to the unified voices of hundreds of coastal municipalities and elected officials representing millions of residents from Florida to Virginia.

Every coastal government in South Carolina publicly opposed offshore oil, as did Reps. Mark Sanford, R-S.C., Tom Rice, R-S.C., and James Clyburn, D-S.C.

Their voices made a difference.

But in April, Mr. Trump signed an executive order that calls for a new review of his predecessor's offshore oil rules. And this week, he announced that the Interior Department would begin updating its five-year plan earlier than scheduled.

Before the Trump administration can rewrite the rules, however, the public will have a chance to weigh in.

The Bureau of Ocean Energy Management will be accepting public comments on the five-year plan update through Aug. 17. And the National Ocean and Atmospheric

Administration is accepting public comments on seismic testing — a damaging precursor to offshore drilling that can harm marine life — through July 21.

It is time, once again, for coastal voices to let the president know that the Atlantic is not open to the oil business.

Coastal recreation accounts for more than \$20 billion in annual economic impact for South Carolina alone. About 60 percent of the state's tourists visit a coastal area, according to the state Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism.

Optimistic estimates contend that oil and gas drilling could bring the state about \$2.7 billion — over a two-decade period.

In other words, South Carolina and other Atlantic states would be risking their valuable tourism and recreation economies, not to mention priceless marine ecosystems, for a risky, dirty industry that would at best generate less than 1 percent of the value of existing coastal businesses.

It doesn't make sense — at any level.

The rest of South Carolina's legislative delegation — particularly Republican Sens. Tim Scott and Lindsey Graham — should take note of the unrelenting coastal opposition to oil and gas drilling and stand against Mr. Trump's plans.

So should Gov. Henry McMaster, who opposed the proposal as lieutenant governor, but has been silent on the issue since taking office in January.

A change in the White House does not signal a change in public opinion on a dangerous, wrongheaded plan to drill in Atlantic waters. Coastal communities must remain firm in letting federal agencies and elected officials know that we still oppose offshore oil.

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