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Rising tide of opposition to drilling off S.C. coast

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In this May 21, 2015 file photo, a bird covered in oil flaps its wings at Refugio State Beach, north of Goleta, Calif. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong, File)

The strength of public opposition to oil drilling off the South Carolina coast is nothing short of overwhelming.

Every major coastal South Carolina municipality now officially opposes drilling in Atlantic waters, along with conservation groups, mayors and other elected officials. Those opponents include Charleston Mayor Joe Riley and Congressmen Mark Sanford and Jim Clyburn.

But burgeoning grassroots efforts against drilling also reveal a groundswell of support and lend an invaluable voice to those outside the realm of public office.

Don't Drill Lowcountry, an organization founded this summer by five Sullivan's Island residents, filled its Mount Pleasant venue to capacity and beyond at its first meeting this week, for example. Its Facebook page gained more than 1,600 followers in just over three weeks, and similar groups across the East Coast boast thousands of equally dedicated supporters.

But it will take more than Facebook "likes" to protect the Atlantic coastline from the risks of offshore oil.

Despite resolutions and statements of opposition from hundreds of leaders and governments representing more than 1 million East Coast residents, President Barack Obama has remained resolute in plans to open the Atlantic to oil and gas exploration and drilling.

And in South Carolina, Gov. Nikki Haley reaffirmed her support for offshore energy in a statement released this week calling it “critical to our future.” She claimed offshore oil would bring jobs, energy independence and security to the state. Sen. Tim Scott has also vocally supported the plan.

Yet contrary to Mrs. Haley’s statement, the future of the South Carolina coast depends not on offshore oil but rather on the tourism, recreation and fishing industries that drive the Lowcountry economy and boost our quality of life.

If this ill-advised plan is “critical,” it is so only to companies that do seismic exploration, drilling and extraction.

Periodic disasters — including a spill this summer in Santa Barbara, Calif. — confirm that oil drilling remains a risky business despite considerable technological advances implemented in the wake of the 2010 Deepwater Horizon blowout.

In a region where beaches and coastal waters generate billions of dollars in economic impact each year, those risks are simply too grave.

More and more South Carolinians are recognizing that fact and standing up against offshore oil. It’s time for the state’s leadership to join coastal residents and their elected representatives at the local level.

South Carolinians are already doing plenty on behalf of energy independence through their support of expanded nuclear electric programs and the plutonium reprocessing facility at the Savannah River Site.

Offshore drilling is a losing proposition for coastal South Carolina — for its tourism economy and its environment.

It’s time for the rest of the state to recognize the risks.

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