DailyAdvance.com
Elizabeth City, NC

Our View: Coastal communities rising up in opposition to drilling

Saturday, September 5, 2015

The peak beach season may be over after Labor Day, but there is a rising tide of opposition to Gov. Pat McCrory's drive to extract oil off the Carolina coastline.

Last month, Morehead City and Southport became the 20th and 21st cities in North Carolina to oppose offshore seismic testing and drilling, saying it could threaten the commercial fishing and tourism industries. At last count, South Carolina has 20 communities that have passed such resolutions.

They join a growing list, from Oak Island in the far southeast part of the state to as far north as Dare County, including the Dare towns of Nags Head, Manteo, Kill Devil Hills and Duck, to oppose offshore oil and gas exploration.

It's time for our local elected officials to join the list, including Chowan, Perquimans, Elizabeth City, Pasquotank, Camden and particularly Currituck County, which rakes in millions of dollars in tourism revenues from Outer Banks vacationers and stands the most to lose.

That's because the federal government is considering opening a large swath 50 miles off the coast from Virginia to Georgia in the 2017-22 for drilling under the Outer Continental Shelf drilling lease plan.

It's not a Republican-Democrat issue, although it is primarily Republicans doing the pushing for the oil and gas industries.

In July, the Obama administration opened the Eastern Seaboard up to offshore energy exploration and the use of sonic booms that generate sound waves 100 times louder than a jet engine to locate energy deposits.

This was praised by McCrory.

"This is an important step in the right direction toward more jobs for North Carolina and our country, as well as greater energy independence for our nation," McCrory said.

Just two months earlier, McCrory was touting record statewide visitor spending in 2014 of $21.3 billion — nearly equal to the state's annual budget — and 200,000 jobs in the tourism industry.

Visitors to the Tar Heel state generated more than $3.2 billion in federal, state and local taxes in 2014, and local tax receipts from visitor spending grew 5.8 percent to $636.1 million.

Granted, those numbers represent the tourism industry across the entire state, but much of the money generated comes from coastal communities. The beaches generate billions and draw visitors statewide.

Why would the governor want to jeopardize that?

McCrory chairs the Outer Continental Shelf Governors Coalition, formed in 2011 to revive and expand offshore drilling after the BP disaster. The group includes governors from nine coastal states, all Republicans except Democrat Terry McAuliffe of Virginia.

The coalition has ties to the oil and gas industry and is lobbying hard to bring drilling to a beach near you. Coastal communities, however, aren't buying into it.

"Why gamble with a proven industry (tourism) chasing one (oil) that may or may not provide comparable impact 20 years into the future," asked Lee Nettles, executive director for the Outer Banks Visitors Bureau. He was among many opponents when the U.S. Bureau of Ocean Energy Management was in Nags Head gathering public input a few months ago.

McCrory claims drilling could generate more than 55,000 jobs and $3 billion in annual spending in the state.

By contrast, the economic impact of tourism in eight ocean counties will be worth almost $4.5 billion a year by 2035, Nettles said.

Sure oil can be drilled safely, but if accidents happen as they are prone to do, then the numbers would wash out. In the end, the oil and gas industry would reap the profits while coastal towns would be stuck with the mess.

"The risk-reward just isn't there," the Outer Banks Voice quoted Dare County Commissioner Warren Judge as recently saying. "You can't look down the path and see at any point an amount of revenue that would compare to what tourism will provide over the next decades."

Those who have been through hurricanes can imagine what such a storm could do to oil rigs and storage tanks.

Hurricane Katrina in 2005 caused millions of gallons to spill from oil storage tanks on the Gulf coast. Along with Hurricane Rita weeks later, the storms damaged 457 pipelines, destroyed 113 offshore drilling platforms and caused 750,000 gallons of petroleum products to spill from offshore platforms, rigs and pipelines.

The Deepwater Horizon disaster from 2010 gushed an estimated 5 million barrels of crude oil and 4 million pounds of natural gas in 68,000 square miles of Gulf waters and nearly 500 miles of coastline from Louisiana to Florida. It cost BP $18.7 billion to settle with Gulf coast states whose coastal fishing and tourism industries are still grappling with the impacts.

So then the question becomes, is it worth putting North Carolina’s commercial fishing and tourism industry at risk of such a disaster?

Clearly, the answer is no.

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