

July 21, 2014

Keep the oceans clean

The Obama administration's decision to allow seismic searches for oil and gas deposits in the Atlantic Ocean from Delaware to mid-Florida should arouse deep concern among environmental activists.

It's no surprise that the administration buried the announcement at the onset of the weekend, when the White House customarily prefers to release bad news. It came late on Friday, amid a torrent of ominous developments in Ukraine and Gaza.

Seismic searches in the deep are not good for the denizens of the ocean or their caretakers, so the administration may well have hoped few would notice. The timing suggests officials are well aware that the decision will justifiably arouse the wrath of environmental activists because it carries the potential to cause great harm to the ocean environment.

The decision was clothed in language designed to show sensitivity to these concerns. In a written statement, Walter D. Cruickshank, acting director of the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, said: "The bureau's decision reflects a carefully analyzed and balanced approach that will allow us to increase our understanding of potential offshore resources while protecting the human, marine, and coastal environments."

The potential payoff is huge. Geologists believe 1.9 billion barrels of oil and 21.4 trillion cubic feet of natural gas could be recovered off the Mid- and South Atlantic coast. But those estimates are based on less sophisticated surveys done three decades ago. The White House justified the decision by saying those surveys need to be updated.

Despite the administration's precautions, the "dynamite-like" seismic testing cited by environmentalists could injure fish, whales and other marine mammals. This sort of testing is usually a precursor to actual drilling, though that would require a significant process of permitting. Still, the decision is worrisome.

U.S. Sen. Ben Cardin, a Democrat who chairs the Senate's Environment and Public Works Subcommittee on Water and Wildlife, objected to the move. "The Mid-Atlantic is just too environmentally sensitive for drilling," he said. "I urge the administration to reconsider its plans."

The waters off our own state are equally sensitive. Florida Sens. Bill Nelson and Marco Rubio should be every bit as worried as Sen. Cardin. The testing area is beyond the state's regulatory reach, but coastal communities up and down the Atlantic seaboard, including those in Florida, depend on the natural resources of the ocean to drive their economies. Keeping the ocean clean is vital to their existence.

The administration says this is just about updating geological tracts under the ocean. We hope they're sincere. But let's get real. The mere thought of all that potential revenue in the deep makes petroleum executives salivate. They've been wanting to drill in the ocean for years. In fact, the administration was preparing to hold a lease sale off the Virginia coast in 2010 but

canceled it because of the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. Let's hope it doesn't take another disaster to make the administration regret last week's decision.