

Opinion

Editorial: Make voices heard on seismic surveying

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The oil explorers are readying their seismic air guns to sound out deposits off the Georgia coast.

As our time to sound off against the practice runs short, we must pump up the volume.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Fisheries division recently issued incidental harassment authorizations to five seafloor surveying firms. The NOAA endorsement removes the first of two bureaucratic obstacles to offshore exploration.

The permitting requests now lie with the final approvers at the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management. The body denied the permits in 2017, but that was prior to the Trump administration prioritizing offshore energy exploration to establish “a new path for energy dominance in America,” as described by Secretary of the Interior Ryan Zinke.

Expect the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, or BOEM, to act on the requests quickly. NOAA Fisheries authorizations require that surveyors begin their work within one year and complete it within two.

Considering the size of the exploration area -- from Cape May, N.J., to Cape Canaveral, Fla. -- the geologists will be lobbying hard for quick action.

Local residents and officials must counter that push.

The geophysical surveying is disruptive and potentially harmful to marine life. More than that, though, the geologists are searching for places to drill. Should they find oil deposits off our barrier islands, rigs will follow.

And offshore drilling represents a threat to the coastal Georgia shore environment and our economy.

A powerful new voice

Coastal residents have a new ally in the stand against offshore drilling in Governor-elect Brian Kemp.



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Kemp responded to the NOAA authorizations by stating his opposition to “drilling off the coast of Georgia.” That should clear the way for the Georgia General Assembly to pass resolutions that express support for the state’s fishing and coastal tourism industries, extensive salt marsh and marine mammals and oppose offshore oil and gas exploration.

The 2019 session opens Jan. 14.

Similar measures sponsored by Savannah-area legislators Sen. Lester Jackson and Rep. Carl Gilliard and supported by the local delegation failed last year. The legislative defeat was due in no small part to Gov. Nathan Deal’s reluctance to take a position on offshore drilling.

Kemp's strong stance is significant. While elected officials in municipal and county leadership roles have denounced the notion of energy exploration along the coast, Kemp is the most influential Georgia leader to voice opposition.

Deal remains silent on the issue and our congressman, Buddy Carter, supports exploration. As he's fond of saying, he's an "all-of-the-above type of person" when it comes to developing energy resources.

Georgia's U.S. senators, Johnny Isakson and David Perdue, likewise back exploration from the standpoint of increasing U.S. energy independence. Perdue is a Sea Island resident.

Kemp is coastal Georgia's best hope at an 11th hour charge against exploration. Opposition from Florida's governor, Rick Scott, convinced the Trump administration to take the state "off the table" for new offshore oil drilling earlier this year.

The agreement was informal, and Scott is leaving office to join the U.S. Senate. But it shows the federal government's hesitancy to go against state officials, particularly those who, like Kemp, represent the president's party.

We encourage coastal Georgians to show support for Kemp in his opposition to offshore drilling and to continue to lobby Rep. Carter and Sens. Isakson and Perdue to exert their influence on the process.

Speak loud, before the first air gun is fired.

