

February 1, 2015

Protect SC's coast from oil exploration

On Tuesday the Obama administration announced plans to highly restrict offshore oil exploration off Alaska's North Slope while opening waters off the Atlantic coastline from Virginia to Georgia for leasing. We hope the eastern shoreline - including South Carolina's - wasn't opened to drilling simply to balance the decision to protect Alaska's fragile ecosystem.

In addition to blocking access to much of Alaska's oil rich Beaufort and Chukchi seas, the White House also hopes to declare that the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge will be protected as a national wilderness area. Oil companies have sought to drill on ANWR's coastal plain for decades, but have continuously been blocked from doing so.

While it is unlikely that the GOP-controlled Congress would approve a wilderness designation for ANWR, the Interior Department can begin implementing protections on its own. ANWR is home to caribou, polar bears and other wildlife, while the waters off the coast contain rich fisheries of salmon, cod and char, and habitat for beluga whales, golden eagles and spotted seals.

The refuge is pristine wilderness that belongs to all Americans and should be protected from any exploitation in perpetuity.

But while the waters off the Atlantic coastline are more accessible, many of the same arguments against drilling there apply. In fact, it could be argued that oil exploration off the Southeast coast represents a much larger economic threat to the affected states than drilling in Arctic waters.

According to the S.C. Coastal Conservation League, fisheries and other ocean-based tourism support nearly 79,000 jobs and generate over \$4.4 billion each year for the state. One significant oil spill could jeopardize tourism up and down the coast.

And it's not as if this is a remote possibility. In 2010 we witnessed the nightmare of the blowout of the BP Deepwater Horizon rig in the Gulf of Mexico, the worst oil spill in the nation's history. During the five months it took to cap the well, 170 million gallons of toxic crude poured into the gulf.

Despite a massive cleanup effort by nearly 50,000 workers using nearly 7,000 ships and boats, hundreds of thousands of birds and fish died in the oil slick. More than 650 miles of coastline were covered in oil, and the sea bed was blanketed in crude.

Despite a proposed 50-mile buffer zone for any wells off the southeast coast, a large spill could happen here with devastating consequences for South Carolina's top industry. And Atlantic coast states currently are not even allowed to share revenue from offshore energy development.

There is support in some quarters for drilling anywhere, anytime, no matter the risks, in the name of reducing our dependence on foreign oil. But, as President Barack Obama noted in his

recent State of the Union speech, “we are as free from the grip of foreign oil as we’ve been in almost 30 years.”

Because of plentiful oil supplies around the globe, oil prices have dropped dramatically. While U.S. production remains high, more costly oil exploration projects could be abandoned.

The energy industry has yet to take advantage of potential oil leases on land, including public lands, that would be more accessible and less expensive than deep-water drilling. Why should we risk the wildlife, the natural resources and the way of life that South Carolina’s coast provides for oil exploration that will primarily benefit the big, global oil companies?

The risk is too high and the return for South Carolina and other coastal states is too small. Atlantic coastal waters should remain off limits to oil exploration.