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A case of 'oil spill amnesia'

As a federal judge determines how many billions BP should pay for the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, the Obama administration is pushing a troubling plan to allow drilling in the Atlantic Ocean off the East Coast from Virginia to Georgia.

Environmentalists say President Barack Obama is suffering from "oil spill amnesia," and the oil companies no doubt hope the American public is suffering a memory lapse, too. Obama withdrew an offshore drilling plan in 2010, shortly after BP's oil rig exploded, killing 11 people and spewing 200 million gallons of crude into the Gulf of Mexico over 87 days.

Much of the mess remains: Florida State University oceanographers estimate 10 million gallons of oil is still stuck to the seafloor. The disaster also inflicted economic pain in the billions and wiped out an unknown number of plants and animals. Although the carcasses of almost 1,000 dolphins and 500 sea turtles were recovered, scientists say there is no accounting for the number that weren't.

Deepwater Horizon was 41 miles off Louisiana, yet its debris field spread to Florida's gulf coast, where tar balls as well as dead and dying marine life washed up.

That makes the administration's assurances that Atlantic drilling would take place 50 miles offshore less than comforting. And Obama's oil rigs would be in the paths of tropical storms and the fierce waves and winds they marshal.

Disturbingly, for all the talk about improved safety standards since the BP oil spill, no new protections have been required as a result. No related legislation has been passed by Congress, and while the administration says new safety rules are in the works, it's hard to understand why none are in place five years later.

The president's plan, which also protects sensitive waters off Alaska, has pleased coastal Republican governors who say the oil industry will fire up their economies. But the benefits won't be as bountiful as they claim. During recently concluded testimony to determine fines against BP and a codefendant, University of Wyoming energy expert Charles Mason said the oil giant was of only "moderate importance" to the gulf region's economy. Meanwhile, its spill hurt important industries like tourism and fishing, along with a broad range of other businesses, from florists to banks.

The Interior Department estimates that three billion gallons of oil and 31 trillion cubic feet of natural gas is stored within the continental shelf. But especially as the nation strives to expand alternatives to dirty fossil fuels and stem greenhouse-gas pollution, tapping reserves off the East Coast isn't worth the threat to the planet and its plants and animals -- including us.

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