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Sanford sees the light on offshore drilling

The offshore oil industry keeps coming up dry with coastal Lowcountry leaders.

So far, town councils from Hilton Head to Georgetown have voted to put a halt to plans for exploratory drilling because of the threat to marine life and to the coastal economy.

Rep. Mark Sanford's change of heart on the drilling issue says that at least someone in Washington is hearing those local elected officials. And as the representative with the largest portion of South Carolina's coast in his 1st District, his opposition ought to count for something.

At the least, it should encourage the state's other representatives in Washington to reconsider their support of the administration's plan to open the Atlantic to offshore drilling. At this point, 6th District Rep. James Clyburn is the congressional delegation's only other opponent of offshore drilling.

Rep. Sanford, who had gone back and forth on the issue, acknowledged on Monday that his decision was informed by the growing level of coastal opposition. Most recently, the Wadmalaw Island village of Rockville joined the growing chorus demanding no offshore drilling.

Rockville is among 52 jurisdictions along the East Coast to oppose plans to explore the ocean for possible oil reserves, preparatory to offshore drilling. In South Carolina, that number also includes Charleston, James Island, Folly Beach, Isle of Palms, Sullivan's Island, Beaufort, Port Royal, Edisto Beach and the James Island Public Service District.

"In the case of South Carolina, weighing the balance between large blocks of untouched coastal estuarine areas, and in other parts, an established tourism industry, against the potential benefits of drilling is not something that Washington officials are best positioned to do," Rep. Sanford said. "In my view, it makes little sense to even conduct tests when the states and regions affected will have no say in the process of determining — especially when factoring potential impacts on the environment, tourism, along with other risks inherent in the process."

Environmental organizations and wildlife advocates cite research showing that the seismic testing used by oil companies to gauge the presence of oil and natural gas deposits can be harmful to marine mammals, including whales and dolphins. The testing uses sonic booms directed toward the sea floor.

The industry also threatens coastal waterways, which are a rich spawning ground for marine life.

Of course, the issue that most affects coastal residents is the potential damage to the tourism economy from spills, leaks and ugly infrastructure.

Who needs offshore drilling?

Not coastal South Carolina.