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Revisit Beach's Drilling Position

In Republican-dominated North and South Carolina, at least 28 local governments have voted to oppose offshore drilling.

Outer Banks towns, along with Charleston, Hilton Head, Columbia and Beaufort, S.C., have said tourism is too important to their economy and future to risk a spill or disaster. They want no part of offshore seismic testing or drilling for oil and natural gas.

Momentum is clearly building - in city council chambers and company board rooms, among civic groups and on fishing boats in the Carolinas, Georgia and now Virginia - to fight the federal government's plan to sell leases for drilling off the Atlantic coast.

Public officials from Delaware to Florida are on record opposing seismic airgun blasting - the process used to search for oil and gas deposits below the ocean floor.

Two weeks ago, U.S. Rep. Mark Sanford, a South Carolina Republican, asked the Bureau of Ocean and Energy Management not to move forward with seismic testing off his state's coast.

Ten days ago in Virginia Beach, the Hotel Association and the city's Resort Advisory Commission joined the Restaurant Association in opposing drilling. They join every environmental group and everyone who values clean beaches and a healthy ecosystem.

Members of the Hotel Association and RAC said they could not justify the risk to the Beach's tourism industry in the event of a spill. "It takes decades to get out from under that," Billy Almond, RAC chairman, told Pilot reporters.

Against the momentum, U.S. Rep. Scott Rigell, a Virginia Beach Republican, remains at the forefront of efforts to establish an offshore drilling industry in the region.

He cites stronger regulations and changes to drilling operations since the Deepwater Horizon rig exploded in the Gulf of Mexico in April 2010, sending 210 million gallons of oil into the water. Of course, Congress has never enshrined those changes into law, meaning the regulations remain subject to revision - and weakening - by future presidents pressured by a powerful and persuasive petroleum industry.

In the months after Deepwater Horizon, the nation's worst spill, oil and nearly 2 million gallons of chemical dispersant coated everything, drifted to Gulf Coast beaches from Texas to Florida and killed plants, coral and wildlife.

Communities along the gulf continue to struggle with the aftereffects. Beaches remain contaminated, and the damage to marshes and wetlands may take generations to undo.

Rigell maintains drilling can be done safely and that it will bring tens of thousands of jobs to the region. "This would create year-round demand for our hotels and our restaurants," he told The Pilot's Bill Bartel.

It should be noted that it's the American Petroleum Institute - hardly a disinterested party - that has pushed the prediction that drilling will create 25,000 new jobs. It's a number unconfirmed elsewhere.

Still, with unwise encouragement from U.S. Sens. Mark Warner and Tim Kaine, both Virginia Democrats, President Barack Obama last year agreed to reopen the Eastern Seaboard to offshore oil and gas exploration, approving seismic surveys to pinpoint energy deposits deep beneath the ocean floor.

Virginia's leaders -former Republican Gov. Bob McDonnell, current Democratic Gov. Terry McAuliffe and most of the General Assembly - have embraced the oil and gas industry for years.

The push comes despite repeated statements from the Navy that offshore rigs imperil its training off Virginia's coast, training that underlies much of the military's presence in Hampton Roads.

In 2010, two months before the Deepwater disaster, Virginia Beach's City Council passed a resolution supporting drilling for oil and gas off the coast, citing thousands of jobs and hundreds of millions of dollars that would come to Virginia if the federal law changed to allow the state to receive its fair share of royalties.

But the benefits cannot make up for the damage to the tourism industry, or to the environment, if something goes horribly wrong, as happened in 1989 with the Exxon Valdez in Alaska's Prince William Sound and in 2010 with BP's rig in the Gulf.

At the peak of the Deepwater crisis, when oil had been gushing for two months, 37 percent of Gulf waters - 88,522 square miles - were closed to fishing due to contamination.

Trading so many jobs predicted by the industry itself for so many existing jobs dependent on the military and tourism simply makes no sense. Especially since there's no mechanism in place that would provide Virginia with royalties for the risk the commonwealth would take.

Virginia Beach Vice Mayor Louis Jones, who opposed the city's February 2010 resolution supporting drilling, suggested this month that the council revisit the issue, given the new opposition by his city's tourism leaders.

The City Council in Columbia, South Carolina's largest city and two hours from the coast, just voted to oppose drilling. Said Alan Hancock of the Conservation Voters of South Carolina: "Once you dig into this, and understand that it is not going to decrease gas prices and jobs will be minimal, it's not worth risking tens of thousands of (existing) tourism jobs and the billions of dollars that tourism now brings to our state."

It's not often this page recommends that Virginia follow South Carolina's lead, but these folks in the Palmetto State got this one right.