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Winner of the Pulitzer Prize

Rice joins coastal protection chorus

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Coastal South Carolina is a diverse region representing a broad range of people, incomes and lifestyles from Hilton Head to North Myrtle Beach.

But there's one sentiment that residents share — their love of the coast, with its beaches, its marshes, rivers and creeks. They don't want to see it fouled with the byproducts of offshore oil drilling or by oil spills.

Over the last year, 23 local governments have made that sentiment crystal clear as they have approved resolutions opposing oil exploration and offshore drilling.

We can't think of any single issue on which coastal residents are more unified. That unity should be recognized by those elected officials who are in a position to make a change in the federal government's plans to open the Atlantic to offshore exploration next year.

Rep. Tom Rice, R-S.C., who initially supported offshore drilling, reversed his position after local governments in the 7th District made their opposition known, one after the other.

As he told reporter Maya Prabhu: "My title is Representative. I'm supposed to represent the people and if they don't want it, I don't want it."

Last April, the growing public sentiment in the 1st District convinced Rep. Mark Sanford, R-S.C., to join the ranks of those who oppose offshore drilling. Democratic Rep. Jim Clyburn, whose 6th District includes a portion of the coast, also opposes it.

Rep. Rice still supports offshore exploration for oil and natural gas, but if he continues to follow the lead of his constituents, he should come around on that as well. The seismic testing process is a recognized danger to marine mammals, and has been generally opposed by the same local governments that are fighting offshore drilling.

The congressional colleagues of the coastal district representatives should take note.

So should Gov. Nikki Haley, who has inexplicably continued to back the oil industry on the issue despite the clear opposition of coastal residents.

“Gov. Haley should be listening to the voices of those she was elected to serve,” says Samantha Siegel, who is leading a campaign against offshore drilling for the environmental group Oceana. “Coastal residents deserve as much input in this decision as the politicians who appear to be acting on behalf of the oil and gas industry.”

The message has a strong economic basis. Tourism is vital to coastal South Carolina’s economy, and any industry that threatens its health isn’t worth bringing into the state.

Actually, tourism is an economic mainstay for the entire state, a fact that shouldn’t be lost on the other congressmen representing South Carolina.

As Rep. Sanford told our reporter: “Some of the loudest voices for drilling have been from representatives or others who live a long way from the area.”

Certainly, South Carolina’s congressmen should stand as one against an industry that poses an environmental threat from a catastrophic event like the BP spill in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010, plus the regular incidental contamination from leaks and tar balls.

So should the state Legislature.

The South Carolina coast is a treasure that should be preserved from unwarranted development and speculative industrial projects, like offshore drilling.

Coastal South Carolina is unified on that message. The rest of the state — and its leadership — should join in opposing an ill-considered plan to put our beaches and waterways at risk.

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