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Numbers against offshore oil

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The numbers speak for themselves. Tourists spent more than \$20 billion in South Carolina in 2015, setting a record high for the state. That number tops the previous year by nearly a billion dollars.

In 2014, tourism supported one of every 10 jobs in South Carolina. It generated well over \$1 billion in direct tax revenue for the state and local governments.

And tourism revenue has increased almost without exception every year for nearly three decades. There are no signs of that trend slowing, much less reversing itself.

But imagine the devastation of the South Carolina economy if those tourism dollars suddenly went somewhere else. Imagine if the state's coastal communities lost their summer visitors, if fishermen were finally forced completely out of business, or if the natural environment of the coastline was forever damaged.

That's the very real possibility that some seem willing to trade for oil and natural gas drilling off the South Carolina coast. But again, it's not just about hypotheticals. It's about the numbers.

Estimates from the American Petroleum Institute, an oil and gas lobbying group, put the 20-year economic impact of drilling offshore of South Carolina at just \$2.7 billion. Again, that's \$2.7 billion over 20 years.

In other words, oil and gas might generate less than 1 percent of the economic impact that tourism has on South Carolina's economy. And a single major spill would risk the tourism industry's vitality for years.

Even exploration using seismic testing risks marine wildlife, particularly marine mammals who can become disoriented by the loud blasts.

It's not worth it.

Seismic testing was stopped offshore of South Carolina just about a month ago, but exploration companies already are gearing up to try again. So conservation groups are preparing to fight back.

Not surprisingly, every coastal government in South Carolina has come out against opening the state's waters to offshore drilling. So have Reps. Mark Sanford, R-S.C., Jim Clyburn, D-S.C. and Tom Rice, R-S.C. So did Henry McMaster when he was lieutenant governor.

Given the cold, hard numbers it's hard to imagine that the state's other leaders in Columbia and Washington would still support such a reckless plan.

Gov. McMaster, in particular, has the opportunity to differentiate himself from his predecessor, Gov. Nikki Haley, by reasserting his opposition to offshore drilling and oil exploration in S.C. waters. Throughout his career as S.C. attorney general and lieutenant governor, Mr. McMaster strongly supported environmental protections. He should continue to do so as governor.

Sens. Tim Scott, R-S.C., and Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., should also stand up against any future effort to open up Atlantic waters to oil and gas drilling.

It just doesn't make sense to risk \$20 billion a year and the state's largest economic sector for an industry that might at best bring in a mere fraction of that over the next two decades.

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