

March 19, 2015

Editorial: Don't miss the deadline to comment on drilling

The Town of Hilton Head Island this week joined the parade of coastal South Carolina governments opposing offshore drilling for gas and oil, and the window for the public to take a stand is about to close.

We urge everyone to ask questions, keep an open mind, form an opinion and take a stand.

What promises to be a long process began earlier this year when President Barack Obama proposed opening waters off the shores of Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina and Virginia to oil and gas exploration and potential offshore drilling.

The municipal governments, including Beaufort and Port Royal in our county, voice the most common objection: Why risk the tourism and real estate economies with potential oil spills and other environmental threats? They also say there is virtually nothing to be gained in terms of national energy independence and that they owe good environmental stewardship to future generations.

Supporters of offshore drilling, and even a number of people on the fence, point to the economic potential. They stress the industry's jobs, the economic diversification and the money that should flow from the leases to state and local governments. We believe that these are legitimate considerations and that the municipalities that oppose drilling should at the same time be prepared to get their share of compensation if drilling takes place. South Carolina could find itself without any of the financial benefits but still facing the risk of oil spills that come from neighboring states.

It doesn't take any imagination to know what an oil spill looks like.

But it does take imagination to know what the offshore drilling could mean onshore. Where in Beaufort or Jasper counties would onshore processing, refining or storage take place?

We're also bothered by dueling science. On seismic testing, the industry says it presents no problems. It cites the federal Bureau of Ocean Energy Management's chief environmental officer as saying seismic surveys are frequently "used in U.S. waters off of the Gulf of Mexico with no known detrimental impact to marine animal populations or to commercial fishing."

But 75 ocean scientists from institutions worldwide sent a letter to the president saying, "The magnitude of the proposed seismic activity is likely to have significant, long-lasting, and widespread impacts on the reproduction and survival of fish and marine mammal populations in the region, including the critically endangered North Atlantic right whale, of which only 500 remain."

A public meeting to discuss environmental issues will be held from 3 to 7 p.m. Tuesday at the Hyatt Regency Savannah, 2 West Bay St.

The deadline for written comment to the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management is March 30. For details, go to its website, boemoceaninfo.com.

Many organizations have defined arguments on the issue. Research it, balance the potential pluses and minuses, and then do as local municipalities have done and take a stand.