

## Editorial: Score one for Obama in nixing offshore drilling

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An offshore oil drilling platform off the coast of California is seen in 2009. (Associated Press file photo)

Give President Obama credit for listening to local governments before deciding last week to remove the mid- and southeast Atlantic coast from its offshore drilling plans.

More than 100 local governments from Virginia through Georgia have passed resolutions rejecting controversial offshore drilling or the seismic testing required for exploration, including Tybee Island, Savannah, St. Marys, Brunswick and Kingsland.

To be sure, the Obama administration is no friend of the oil industry or other fossil fuels. It has gone out of its way to kill the nation's coal industry, which Democratic voters in coal producing states should remember when they go to the polls. So this decision is hardly shocking.

Drilling and oil industry interests had maintained that offshore oil drilling is compatible with Georgia's \$2 billion coastal tourism industry and would not imperil the environment, including the critically endangered North Atlantic right whale that gives birth here or loggerhead sea turtles that nest on Georgia beaches. But governments weren't convinced, and apparently would rather not take a risk at doing something that could kill the goose that was laying all these golden eggs up and down the East Coast.

"Just as Georgia's businesses and coastal residents have been saying for the last year, 'when you drill you spill,'" said Jennette Gayer, Environment Georgia director. "President Obama heard them and protected marine life, world famous beaches and family vacations from Savannah to Cumberland Island."

Another factor that's probably affecting the public's thinking is gasoline prices, which have been tumbling with the price of oil. It's a supply-and-demand world. Finding other sources of oil becomes less critical to consumers as the cost of filling their gas tanks becomes more affordable.

"We are proud of the thousands of citizens who stood up on behalf of our irreplaceable coast," said Alice M. Keyes, vice president of coastal conservation with One Hundred Miles. "You don't have to live on the coast of Georgia to know how special this place is and how much we have to lose if the oil and gas industry is allowed to operate off shore."

Ms. Keyes speaks for many Georgians. It's reassuring to know that Mr. Obama was listening.

In fact, federal officials explained their reasons for removing much of the Atlantic coast from drilling by saying they were responding to “market dynamics, strong local opposition and conflicts with competing commercial and military ocean uses.”

That’s a mouthful, but it’s another way of saying it didn’t make economic or strategic sense, more people were against it than for it, and it would create headaches that weren’t worth the extra trouble — pretty good logic.

“This is an incredible day for the Southeast,” said Sierra Weaver, senior attorney for the Southern Environmental Law Center. “It represents the hard work of thousands of people and protects some of our most cherished places, from the Chesapeake Bay and the Outer Banks to the South Carolina Lowcountry and Georgia barrier islands.”

And it’s not as if the Obama administration is totally turning its back on offshore drilling. Instead, officials seem to want to do a better job of looking before they allow drilling. Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewell and Abigail Ross Hopper, director of the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, announced last week the latest draft for offshore oil and gas leasing for 2017-2022. The proposed program still evaluates 13 potential lease sales in six planning areas - 10 potential sales in the Gulf of Mexico and three potential sales off the coast of Alaska.

“This is a balanced proposal that protects sensitive resources and supports safe and responsible development of the nation’s domestic energy resources to create jobs and reduce our dependence on foreign oil,” Jewell said. “The proposal focuses potential lease sales in areas with the highest resource potential, greatest industry interest and established infrastructure. At the same time, the proposal removes other areas from consideration for leasing and seeks input on measures to further reduce potential impacts to the environment, coastal communities and competing ocean and coastal uses, such as subsistence activities by Alaska Natives.”

Why drill if there’s little chance of hitting pay dirt? And why drill and risk spills that could harm coastal economies? U.S. Rep. Buddy Carter, R-Pooler, who supports offshore drilling, faulted the Obama administration for “flip flopping.” It was more like keeping an open mind and being flexible and letting local governments show the way instead of bowing to dictates from Washington.

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