

Editorial: The proper posture on offshore drilling

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Offshore drilling seems to have the approval of Virginia politicians and the majority of the state's residents. (AP Photo/Chris Carlson)

Just over a year ago in this space, [we lamented the Obama administration's decision](#) to green-light oil and gas drilling off the Virginia coast and the entire Outer Continental Shelf from the Mid-Atlantic to Florida.

Today, we are able to applaud its decision to reverse that position and ban drilling off the southern East Coast.

As the prospect of offshore drilling has been considered over the past several years, the tide of support for the idea in Virginia has been strong and bipartisan. Once early studies suggested an abundance of oil and gas beneath the ocean floor, Republicans and Democrats alike here were drooling over the prospect of new jobs and a wonderful economic shot in the arm.

In 2013, then-Gov. Bob McDonnell went so far as to earmark potential revenue from offshore drilling for his transportation funding program. Broad support for drilling remained even after last December's report from the Southern Environmental Law Center suggested the potential economic benefits were highly exaggerated.

The report also pointed out that the federal government's formula for "revenue sharing" means the revenues accrue to Washington while the states incur the risks, whether it's the environmental and tourism damage from a spill, or waging an investment in infrastructure to support an industry that gambles on the quantity and availability of the resource.

While the administration's change of heart is welcome news, it's important to note that the decision could be reversed again by another president down the road.

The decision may have been influenced by the heretofore unspoken concerns of the Pentagon and NASA about the impact offshore drilling on the operations of military bases in Hampton Roads and the prospect of more rocket launches from Wallops Island. It's crucial for both national security and Virginia's economic well-being that these ports and bases, which are unlike others on the East of Gulf Coasts, maintain their missions and capabilities.

What we prefer to take from the announcement by Interior Secretary Sally Jewell is an unequivocal reinforcement of the concepts that have guided the administration's environmental decision-making. It's not just that there is now a global oil glut that limits the profitability of petroleum from new sources, or that the expanding use of domestic natural gas is moving the United States closer to its goal of energy independence.

Offshore drilling needs to be set aside because we must wean ourselves from dirty, nonrenewable fossil fuels and invest more in renewable sources such as wind, solar and geothermal.

Rather than championing an environmentally and economically unhealthy reliance on fossil fuels, Virginia leaders should move ahead with new energy technologies and worker retraining that will put the commonwealth at the forefront of high-demand jobs and industries of the future.

Virginia took a small step in that direction last week when Gov. Terry McAuliffe announced plans for the state to buy electricity produced from a proposed Dominion Virginia Power 20-megawatt solar plant in Remington, with Microsoft offsetting the extra costs associated with the plan. The public-private project could be a model for others.

The decision to prohibit offshore drilling should remove that option from the economic equation. It's time for Virginia to stop pondering what might have been and look at this as an opportunity to lead.

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