

The Post and Courier

Winner of the Pulitzer Prize

Hold line against offshore oil

May 12, 2017

Offshore drilling for oil isn't an immediate threat, but with President Donald Trump's executive order — "America-First Offshore Energy Strategy" — it is definitely on the horizon. And seismic testing for oil and gas deposits might be just around the corner. It is time for coastal South Carolinians again to speak out against both bad ideas.

A good start is a bill submitted by Rep. Leon Stavrinakis, D-Charleston, to block state support for the development of infrastructure that would be needed for offshore oil development. It already has the support of a bipartisan group of coastal legislators.

"We need to protect our beaches from the risk of drilling for oil and gas in the Atlantic," Rep. Stavrinakis said in a Thursday press release, in which he cited the dangers the industry poses to tourism, fisheries and coastal jobs. "The specter of Washington, D.C., allowing risky drilling off South Carolina's coast is an affront to every city and town — from North Myrtle Beach to Charleston to Hilton Head — that has already rejected drilling."

The bill might not be an easy sell to legislators representing districts beyond the coastal region, but the danger that offshore drilling poses to the state's tourism industry and coastal resources underscores the importance of continued opposition next session.

In contrast, legislation proposed by Sen. Stephen Goldfinch, R-Murrell's Inlet, should be scuttled by his coastal colleagues. He seeks to have a non-binding statewide referendum on the issue, putting this loaded question to the voters:

"Do you favor the development of an offshore oil and natural gas industry if conducted in a manner that uses the highest standards of safety and most advanced available technology to vigilantly protect South Carolina's precious natural resources, vital tourism industry, and unique quality of life while advancing economic growth through the creation of energy industry jobs and the use of increased revenue to the State resulting in a tangible benefit to the taxpayers?"

The residents of Sen. Goldfinch's own coastal district should remind him that accidents happen in a world where human error, mechanical imperfections and coastal hurricanes all play unexpected roles. And when the accident is an oil spill, the consequences are vastly magnified.

Besides, as Rep. Stavrinakis noted, the coast already has spoken on the matter, in virtually every local jurisdiction from the Georgia border to the North Carolina line. That should be the vote that counts, since coastal resources and livelihoods are at risk. Estimates of the economic boon for offshore oil development put it at a fraction of the existing value of the tourism industry.

And while the opponents of offshore drilling are at it, they should also object to seismic testing because of its potential to injure marine mammals with its loud underwater booms. And for the simple reason that, as drilling opponent Frank Knapp put it, “the only purpose of seismic testing is to drill the unwanted oil wells.”

Mr. Knapp leads the Business Alliance for Protecting the Atlantic Coast, representing some 41,000 businesses and thousands of commercial fishermen in opposition to offshore drilling.

South Carolina’s coastal congressmen have listened to the opponents and have joined their ranks. So did Henry McMaster, while serving as lieutenant governor. Mr. McMaster should restate his opposition now that he is the state’s chief executive.

The governor’s leadership could make a big difference as offshore drilling opponents get ready to go at it again.

http://www.postandcourier.com/opinion/editorials/hold-line-against-offshore-oil/article_c6911526-3698-11e7-9251-3ba2f7c22f0e.html