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Is anyone in Columbia listening to the coast? FYI, we said no offshore drilling

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So the Department of Health and Environmental Control is going to let some oil company go out and shoot seismic guns into the ocean off our coast.

Not only could this put a dent in our maritime industry — fish don't react well to blasts that carry the force of dynamite — it is the first step toward an offshore drilling industry in South Carolina.

And most people don't want that.

DHEC knows this but apparently didn't want to listen to us carp. They decided to piggy-back the mandated public hearing for this permitting process onto a federal hearing in early April — circumventing more than 300 requests for a separate hearing.

The state agency also made this decision on top of resolutions passed by coastal towns from Myrtle Beach to Hilton Head — including Charleston, Isle of Palms, Sullivan's Island and Folly Beach — that flat out said we don't want offshore drilling.

Someone needs to ask the people running this state what part of "No" they don't understand.

Would they let the coast unilaterally decide to take everything west of Columbia and use it to store nuclear waste? That would make us money, too. Or how about we let the coal industry strip mine all those Upstate mountains?

What, you say there's no coal in those mountains?

Well, what a coincidence, scientists say there isn't much oil off our coast.

But that's not stopping the politicians.

The big ruse

Local officials were just as upset about this decision as most people.

“The decision is an unfortunate one; it flies in the face of all the feedback they’ve gotten from coastal communities,” says Sullivan’s Island Mayor Pat O’Neil. “Something like this is just too important to go through the motions.”

Sure, DHEC knows what the opposition is going to say. But that doesn’t mean you don’t have a hearing, especially on something as important as this. It’s the law, for one thing.

The real problem is that we’re even having this debate. It’s all a big ruse. Politicians have told gullible folks that drilling off the Atlantic coast will lessen the country’s dependence on foreign oil.

No, it won’t. Even the sunniest projections of what lies off the coast would not feed America’s oil habit for more than four days a year (and actual geologists believe there is far less than that). OPEC members won’t even have to cut down on their shrimp cocktail.

They might just have to get it somewhere else.

But politicians, lubricated with campaign donations from special interests, have drilled, baby, drilled it into our heads that this leads to energy independence, that it will allow us to tell the Middle East to take a flying leap.

That’s not only an unforgivable lie, it is a political stunt that could change the entire coast, putting one of our top industries — tourism — at risk, and damage the very thing attracting so many new residents and businesses to the state.

Charleston Mayor Joe Riley says the risk is just too great.

“One of the greatest treasures we have here are the miles and miles of unspoiled beaches and clean tidal estuaries,” Riley says. “There would be spills — you can’t drill for oil without having spills and if, heaven forbid, we had a bad one, it could be years, or decades, before we recover.”

Don’t believe it? Just ask some of those Gulf Coast communities how they are faring five years after the Deepwater Horizon incident.

Real independence

Folly Beach Mayor Tim Goodwin worries that offshore drilling will change the entire landscape of South Carolina, accident or no.

He’s right.

Look at Houston, or the Louisiana Gulf Coast. Go to Google Earth and call up an aerial view of Port Fourchon, La., O’Neil insists. He says the onshore support for the rigs off that stretch of coast take up about as much room as Sullivan’s Island.

And it’s all sitting in the middle of vanishing wetlands.

“The ‘E’ in DHEC is supposed to stand for ‘environmental,’ ” O’Neil astutely points out.

Goodwin can sympathize. DHEC cuts down entire forests to drown Folly Beach in paperwork every time it wants to move a shovel of sand, yet they are going to allow blasting and drilling — and open the door to oil spills — just offshore?

“It can be devastating to a town, not to mention ecosystems,” Goodwin says. “Is it really worthwhile?”

No, it’s not. Even if there never is an oil spill, do we set up man-made canals, miles of pipes and industrial sites along our beautiful coast for a piddling amount of oil?

Not if we have any common sense.

If the politicians were really interested in getting us off foreign oil, they’d look at Clemson’s wind turbine program in North Charleston, or any of the other alternative fuel sources being developed out there. There are better options for fuel that are far cleaner and don’t put our coast in jeopardy.

But they obviously aren’t as profitable to the right people. And that gives you a real good perspective on what the term “oily” really means.

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