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Editorial: Ongoing Gulf oil spill another reason not to drill off South Carolina

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FILE - In this May 1, 2009 file photo, offshore oil drilling platform 'Gail' operated by Venoco, Inc., is shown off the coast of Santa Barbara, Calif. (AP Photo/Chris Carlson, File)

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An oil spill off the Louisiana coast that is soon to become the largest in U.S. history provides another costly environmental lesson on why it's a terrible idea to drill for oil and gas off the South Carolina coast.

Apparently, some offshore leaks just can't be plugged. For 14 years, oil has been pouring into the Gulf of Mexico since Hurricane Ivan wrecked the Taylor Energy platform 12 miles off the Louisiana coast. And with no end in sight, the spill is now on pace to outdo the 2010 Deepwater Horizon disaster, according to The Washington Post.

Because of an undersea landslide triggered by the storm, the well heads are buried under about 100 feet of mud in 450 feet of water. Despite years of mitigation efforts — about a third of the leaking wells have been plugged — 300-700 barrels of oil are still escaping daily.

And what's left of Taylor Energy is fighting the Interior Department in court to walk away from the mess and get back \$450 million in a fund meant to pay for the cleanup.

Imagine a similar spill in the Atlantic: It would be more of a plague than a one-time disaster. Compared to the Gulf of Mexico, the Atlantic Coast is nearly twice as prone to hurricanes. Climate change is believed to be making storms more intense. And the north-flowing Gulf Stream, which has a tendency to push near-shore spills closer to land, could spread any spill for hundreds, even thousands, of miles. A spill off Georgia, for instance, might slime the coasts of both Carolinas and Virginia — and continue for years.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration held a listening session Monday in Charleston about ocean-based economic opportunities, including offshore gas and oil exploration. The agency should heed residents' opposition.

Much about the Taylor Energy spill in Louisiana is just now coming to light, thanks in part to environmentalists who noticed its oil slicks while monitoring the aftermath of the Deepwater Horizon disaster. The impact of the Taylor spill on marine life is still unknown.

Aside from disasters like the one in Louisiana, oil spills are inevitable. For every 1,000 offshore wells, uncontrolled releases of oil, or blowouts, average about 20 per year, The Post reported. Fires erupt on offshore rigs about every three days on average. That could spell disaster for South Carolina’s multibillion-dollar tourism economy.

If Gov. Henry McMaster can’t persuade President Donald Trump and Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke to exempt South Carolina from drilling in federal waters — as they did for Florida — he should call for legislation that forbids oil infrastructure in state waters. New Jersey is among a handful of states that passed such laws.

The spill off Louisiana reinforces the need for South Carolinians and their lawmakers to remain vocal in their opposition to offshore oil exploration. All the oil in Texas wouldn’t be worth the cost of having a permanently damaged coastline.

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