

January 29, 2015

Editorial: Be mindful of consequences of oil, gas exploration

Now that President Obama has opened up parts of the Atlantic coastline, including North Carolina, to oil and gas exploration, attention should turn to safeguarding the ocean and our shores against negative environmental effects of an activity that is known to pollute.

Gov. Pat McCrory and legislative leaders have pushed for offshore drilling, as well as hydraulic fracturing, to search for oil and gas deposits. Caution is warranted.

Finding oil and gas at the bottom of the ocean is an expensive venture and a risky one environmentally.

A recent scientific study outlined a grim future for our oceans. Skeptics will refuse to believe those predictions, but there is already evidence that humans are affecting the oceans. Warm-

water fish are moving to cooler climates, coral reefs are dying and, say researchers, as the oceans take on more carbon dioxide, they are becoming increasingly more acidic. Mining and other activities affecting the sea floor also have an impact on marine life.

There is also considerable concern among environmentalists about the effects of seismic testing – required for mapping potential oil and gas deposits – on whales and other ocean life.

Perhaps state leaders are willing to take that risk. They have been told by industry advocates that offshore drilling could create 55,000 new jobs in North Carolina and \$4 billion. If true, that is a substantial economic benefit. Likewise, they see fracking in some inland counties as another potential boom.

But there could be a high cost, too, if that activity fouls the environment or harms other industries important to the coastal economy, most notably fishing and tourism.

It is also disappointing that, even as they promote fossil fuel extraction, many state leaders also seek to kill tax credits that have helped North Carolina become a leader in the development of renewable energy, especially solar power. It is unrealistic to expect that the United States will be able to eliminate the need for fossil fuels anytime soon, but renewable sources should play an important role in our energy future.

Several companies have expressed interest in getting offshore permits, but timing could be affected by currently low oil prices and an abundance of other, cheaper sources of oil and gas.

Regardless, state lawmakers have an obligation to protect public health and the environment and to hold energy companies responsible for any damage they do. Anything less is a breach of their duties to the people.