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Editorial: Close door to drilling off Florida's coast

The U.S. Interior Department has produced a questionable new study that could reopen a door to oil and gas exploration off the Atlantic Coast that should remain slammed shut. By proposing environmental safeguards as a prelude to authorizing undersea testing, the agency gives hope to those who want to forget the BP oil disaster in the Gulf of Mexico, shift the focus from cleaner energies and resume the pursuit of dirtier fuels. There is no reason to reignite a debate over oil drilling off Florida's east coast.

The department recently announced it has completed a long-awaited assessment of how to protect marine life from the impact of seismic surveys. These blasts from underwater air guns emit sound waves over long durations and large areas that help map energy deposits below the ocean floor. Some conservation groups object, saying the practice could kill or injure huge numbers of whales, dolphins and other marine life. In its report, the department recommends a number of ways to mitigate the damage, from restricting the work from whale and sea turtle routes to requiring more passive forms of undersea testing.

Agency officials point out the study does not automatically authorize undersea surveys. That involves a separate process that is not expected to produce a permit before the end of the year. Actual drilling would not begin until at least an oil production ban in the Atlantic expires in 2017. Still, the report clears the way for the Interior Department to start the clock on drilling by permitting marine mining firms to explore tens of thousands of miles of open water from Delaware to Cape Canaveral. Already, nine companies have applied for the seismic survey rights, with six companies looking to operate in federal waters within miles of the Florida coast.

The department, in its defense, complied with an order from Congress in conducting the study. But much has changed since this effort began in earnest in April 2010, only two weeks before the Deepwater Horizon offshore oil rig exploded in the Gulf of Mexico, killing 11 and releasing 206 million gallons of oil. Domestic energy production is increasing, and supplies of cheaper natural gas are making the U.S. economy more energy efficient. The latest federal estimates show that increased supplies of U.S. crude through 2040 will result mainly from higher onshore production.

There's no economic case for opening new areas to offshore drilling — especially since the industry sits idle on more than 29 million acres of active leases. The nation has come a long way in several years toward addressing its supply needs through cleaner energy and efficiency projects that are far safer and more sustainable than offshore drilling. Florida's congressional delegation should prevent the department's study from being used to validate a return to the pre-Deepwater Horizon days. And the Obama administration needs to respect states like Florida that have worked hard to flourish without jeopardizing their coasts.