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Offshore drilling: Handle with care

North Carolina isn't the dirtiest state in the nation, very far from it. According to a recent study we came across from WalletHub, Tar Heels in the main are also pretty "eco-friendly." Nationally we rank 22nd overall when it comes to protecting the environment.

For the record, Vermont and Oregon are first and second in eco-friendliness. Dead last? Well it's Louisiana with Texas just barely in front it. Really, who's shocked by that based on recent history?

WalletHub compared each of the 50 states in terms of 14 metrics designed to illustrate each state's environmental quality and how policies impact those areas. North Carolina, now among the most populated states, fared poorly in only one area — water quality. Our rank is No. 39. That's not so surprising either considering well-documented incidents like the coal ash spill in the Dan River last year or a massive sewage spill right here in Burlington at around the same time.

Yes, we've come a long way in terms of protecting our water, but have some distance left to go.

That's why it was so disappointing last week to read transcripts of Gov. Pat McCrory's statements before a congressional subcommittee regarding offshore drilling for oil and natural gas off the North Carolina coast. McCrory wanted to make the case that a 50-mile buffer proposed by the federal government between North Carolina's beaches and drilling for oil and gas in the Atlantic Ocean is too far, would keep the most valued drilling sites off limits and restrict development for no reason.

We disagree with the governor.

There are myriad reasons for state residents to be wary of offshore drilling that might veer too close to some of North Carolina's most picturesque, visited and economically valuable sites. We're talking about places such as Emerald Isle and Atlantic Beach; Wrightsville Beach, Kure Beach and Topsail Island; Wilmington, Beaufort and Morehead City; Ocracoke, Hatteras and Nags Head.

We're talking about landmarks rooted in our maritime history, locales that make our state a powerful lure for visitors who spend millions of dollars annually and oceans that have supported commercial fishing families for generations. We're talking about a geographic feature that makes North Carolina stand out, a jewel that should be polished and protected, not put in potential peril.

Like, for example, what Louisiana and Texas would do.

Offshore drilling has been controversial in this and other states for decades. The energy industry sees the area as a potentially untapped resource available to possible exploration

again when President Obama moved to open waters off North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia and Virginia to drilling. The Interior Department plans to hold an Atlantic lease sale in 2021 and set a 50-mile buffer to help protect coastal interests such as tourism and fishing. It's also there to avoid conflicts with multiple uses already in place along our coast, most particularly, the military.

We're not arguing that offshore drilling shouldn't be pursued. McCrory correctly points out the high potential for jobs and economic development. But we do believe the buffer exists for many good reasons, and any move to bring drilling closer to our shoreline should be taken with great caution and serious deliberation.

McCrory may be correct when he says offshore drilling can be undertaken with little impact on the environment or coastal activities. But one incident could have a negative impact lasting for decades. We agree that the issue requires further environmental study before any definitive regulations are approved. And even then, the state should think long and hard about the kind of place North Carolina wishes to be.

It's the eco-friendly thing to do.