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Two more reasons not to drill

As South Carolina continues to consider whether to allow oil drilling off the state's coast, two compelling new arguments against that risky endeavor emerged over the last week.

A pipeline leak in Santa Barbara, Calif., spilled at least 21,000 gallons of oil into the Pacific Ocean on Tuesday, and the National Ocean and Atmospheric Administration linked a massive dolphin die-off to the 2010 BP Deepwater Horizon blowout in a report released Wednesday.

The Santa Barbara spill demonstrates the risks inherent in every step of the oil production process. The leak started with a pair of onshore pumps and poured into the Pacific Ocean through a nearby storm drain. The resulting oil slick stretched for nine miles.

Industry advocates argue that significant improvements in offshore drilling safety make a blowout comparable to the BP Horizon disaster in 2010 dramatically less likely today. Even if that's the case, though, extracting, transporting and refining oil remains a risky — and potentially dirty — business.

After all, pipelines rank among the safest methods to transport oil, but the Santa Barbara incident shows that they too remain subject to periodic mishaps.

Aside from the obvious environmental damage, the Santa Barbara slick could be a disaster for that city's tourism and seafood industries. Officials closed nearby beaches and campgrounds indefinitely, and fishing and shellfish harvesting have been suspended.

That should offer a timely warning to South Carolinians similarly dependent on beaches and coastal waters for work and recreation.

Of course, humans aren't the only victims of marine oil accidents.

Since 2010, more than 1,000 dolphins have washed up dead on Gulf Coast beaches, and the tally is still rising.

So-called "unusual mortality events" are relatively common in dolphin populations, often caused by infectious diseases. But NOAA researchers found significantly higher levels of organ damage in dolphins near the site of the spill, compared to dolphins found in other regions.

According to the report, oil exposure can damage the marine mammals' lungs and adrenal glands, leaving them more susceptible to infections.

It's only the latest evidence on the far-reaching impact of Horizon spill that dumped some 4.9 million barrels of oil — about 205 million gallons — into Gulf waters.

An accident even a fraction of the Horizon spill's scale could devastate the Lowcountry's already fragile seafood industry and jeopardize the tourism economy for years.

As last week's Santa Barbara spill proves, there are plenty of ways the oil industry could damage coastal South Carolina.

And accidents far less dramatic than the fiery Horizon catastrophe could still do severe and lasting damage to our state's precious coast.