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Outrageously dismissive DHEC

Why should the state Department of Health and Environmental Control board have reconsidered its staff's decision on offshore seismic testing? There are plenty of reasons.

More than 300 people requested an opportunity to address the DHEC board regarding its endorsement of offshore seismic testing.

Seventeen municipalities and counties in the state — representing more than 587,000 people — have voted to oppose such testing.

U.S. Rep. Mark Sanford and S.C. Sen. Chip Campsen, R-Charleston, have both publicly opposed seismic testing and drilling off the state's coast.

And so have the mayors of Beaufort, Charleston and Folly Beach who, along with the Coastal Conservation League, South Carolina Wildlife Federation and Abundant Seafood, petitioned the DHEC board to reverse its decision to permit Spectrum to conduct seismic survey testing off the coast of South Carolina.

Indeed, it is hard to recall a decision by a public body that has been met with such universal opposition from the area that would be most affected by it.

All to no avail. Without any comment from the public Thursday, the board dismissed the opposition. Spectrum will get its permit.

It was a stunning decision by a board that is charged with representing the public interest and the environment.

The coastal opposition is clear. And that opposition is based, in part, on solid environmental reasons — despite the assertion of one DHEC board member that the opposition to testing was mostly emotional, not scientific.

Seismic testing uses air guns that fire intense blasts of compressed air — one of the loudest man-made sounds in the ocean. They can occur as often as every 10 seconds and go on for weeks at a time.

Scientists have found that the process is disruptive of marine mammals, sea turtles and fish. Indeed, 75 scientific experts from around the world sent a letter to President Obama in March voicing concern about seismic testing in the Atlantic.

Still none of that information got in the way of DHEC's decision to roll out the red carpet to the offshore oil industry. Even seismic testing apologists would have to agree that offshore drilling comes with significant risks to the environment. Just look at California and the Gulf shore.

Considering the safety of seismic testing without considering the safety of offshore drilling is foolish. The purpose of testing is to find productive areas to drill for oil or natural gas.

And more companies like Spectrum are expected to pursue their own permits to do more seismic testing off South Carolina's coast. They don't share results with each other or the public.

Of course offshore drilling is an environmental concern. A big one.

But it is also an economic one. According to the petition to DHEC, recreational fishing accounts for more than 3,300 jobs, \$307 million in sales and \$185 million in value added to South Carolina's gross domestic product.

Further, opponents note that marine fisheries provide more than \$1 billion dollars in economic value to the state. Coastal tourism is responsible for about half of the state's \$17 billion industry.

And the impact of outdoor recreation-related coastal tourism in South Carolina is more than \$7 billion.

Jeopardizing all that in hopes that earlier surveys were wrong and there really is oil or gas off the coast of South Carolina is preposterous in itself.

And thinking it would be beneficial to the state to drill if gas or oil is discovered doesn't count the greater costs to the South Carolina coast.

The DHEC board's quick dismissal of the opposition is nothing short of outrageous.