

July 3, 2014

Editorial: Ill timing for seismic testing

We value scientific research, but not at the expense of the very environment being studied.

That is why we support the injunction filed Thursday by the state Department of Environmental Protection to stop seismic testing 15 to 50 miles southeast of Barnegat Inlet. The testing is aimed at examining how the New Jersey coastline advanced and retreated as sea levels rose and fell over millions of years.

That would yield valuable information for scientists and others looking for ways to preserve the Jersey Shore in the face of climate change. We don't deny the worth of such research. But the timing is wrong. Mid-summer is prime time for commercial and recreational fishing in that area, and the risk from seismic testing to fish and to the economic viability of the fishing industry would be at its peak. The court should stop the project at least until the summer is over. The testing is scheduled to begin as early as Monday.

The testing, led by Rutgers University researchers and funded by the National Science Foundation, is to take place on a vessel owned by Columbia University that will aim sound pulses at the seabed and measure echoes that bounce off sediment layers up to a mile and a half beneath the sea floor.

The "sound pulses" are better described as blasts, producing 250 decibels every five seconds, 24 hours a day for 30 days. Even Gregory Mountain, Rutgers professor of earth and planetary sciences and leader of the research team, admits there is some risk to marine life from this monthlong barrage. He thinks the damage is worth it. We don't. Not if it can be appreciably reduced by delaying it into the fall or winter.

Environmentalists have been sounding their own alarms over this research project, which they maintain was slipped in under the radar and will cause harm not only to fish and marine mammals, including endangered species, but damage to the fishing industry at the height of the season.

The project is no longer under the radar. As DEP Commissioner Bob Martin said Wednesday, "We believe the timing of this program will be detrimental to various marine species that migrate and breed off the New Jersey coast," adding that it will hurt the commercial fishing industry that relies heavily on these resources. He remains hopeful that, at the very least, the initiative will be rescheduled for a "less impactful time."

Conducting the testing in the winter seems a reasonable compromise. The Atlantic Ocean and layers of sediment will still be there, and the harm to fish and the fishing industry will be much less severe. If Rutgers is insisting that the research be conducted now simply as an accommodation to the researchers and the availability of the research vessel, the legitimate concerns of the DEP clearly outweigh those considerations.

Now isn't the time for the seismic testing. But the research should eventually proceed. As Mountain told Rutgers Today in an interview, "By understanding how the coastline responded to past changes in sea level, we will have a better idea of how far inland a rising ocean might reach by the end of this century." He believes that whatever his team learns by looking into the past will help current and future researchers and policymakers better define and carry out more informed strategies to protect those who live and work on the coast.

Conduct the research. But not now. The court should grant the injunction the DEP seeks as soon as possible, and force the study of the past New Jersey coastline sometime into the near future.