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Seismic testing off coast ill-advised

The federal government has proposed using seismic air guns to search for oil and gas in the Atlantic Ocean, especially off the coast of Maryland — a plan we in Maryland find ill-advised.

Eight members of the Maryland Congressional delegation, including Sen. Ben Cardin, chairman of the Senate Environment and Public Works Subcommittee on Water and Wildlife, and Sen. Barbara A. Mikulski, recently wrote to President Barack Obama, urging his administration to reject the proposal and refrain from permitting seismic air gun testing off the coast of Maryland.

Such testing would be a first step toward opening the Atlantic Ocean to offshore drilling, and the technology used for such exploration has been found to be incredibly harmful to marine mammals and fisheries in the region, they wrote.

Seismic air guns fire dynamite-like blasts of compressed air every 10 to 12 seconds, 24 hours a day, for weeks and months at a time. These loud air gun blasts can be heard for many hundreds of miles in the ocean and, as a result, can drive whales to abandon their habitats, go silent, and cease foraging over vast areas. At shorter distances, it can cause permanent hearing loss, injury, and even death for whales, dolphins and fish.

According to Department of the Interior estimates, the use of air guns would injure about 138,000 marine mammals and disrupt marine mammal feeding, calving, breeding, and other vital activities more than 13.5 million times. These injuries and disturbances would include critically endangered species, like the North Atlantic right whale, of which fewer than 500 remain.

“Maryland is famous for its blue crabs and is a state that depends on the ocean. Seventeen of our 24 counties border tidal water, for a total of 4,431 miles,” local lawmakers wrote. They added that the gross domestic product from Maryland’s living resources, which includes fishing, hatcheries, aquaculture, seafood processing and seafood markets, is valued at over \$122 million and the GDP from ocean-based tourism and recreation in the state totals nearly \$2.7 billion.

Some 83,000 jobs in the fishing, tourism and recreation sectors in Maryland are directly dependent on the marine resources. The state generates millions of dollars in commercial fishing from blue crab, striped bass, menhaden and oysters, which all depend on a healthy ocean for their survival.

The cost of the proposed action to Marylanders and the marine life off our coasts is far too great to risk.