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Offshore drilling fight is still on

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Despite a major victory in November, the fight against drilling for oil off South Carolina's coast isn't over yet.

President Barack Obama used his executive power Tuesday to invoke a rarely used 1953 law to ban oil exploration indefinitely from parts of the Arctic and Atlantic oceans, but South Carolina's offshore waters inexplicably weren't included.

President Obama cited a number of deep offshore canyons, wellsprings of marine life, as reasons for moving to permanently protect offshore waters from the Chesapeake Bay northward. But similar, ecologically important structures also exist off our coast, such as the "Charleston Bump."

The bottom feature, 80-100 miles offshore, acts as a speed bump in the Gulf Stream and is believed to be important to about 35 fish species. For example, it is the only known spawning ground in U.S. waters where wreckfish occur in numbers large enough to support a fishery.

"We are extremely disappointed," says Frank Knapp, the head of a statewide coalition against drilling, adding that he is baffled as to why areas south of Chesapeake Bay were left out. The Conservation Voters of South Carolina also decried the omission.

Presumably, drilling off the South Carolina coast, anywhere from state waters 3 miles offshore to international water extending 200 miles, is prohibited for at least five years, following the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management's reversal of its plan to open the Atlantic Coast to leasing. That decision came after a grassroots effort led by coastal residents and local governments, citing the cost both to the tourism economy and the wealth of natural resources.

But the incoming administration has promised to reverse course and start putting offshore plots up for lease by the time the 2018 midterm elections roll around. That is less than two years away.

Mr. Knapp says his organization, the Business Alliance for Protecting the Atlantic Coast, represents 35,000 businesses and about 500,000 commercial fishing families. It now plans to focus on Congress to get lawmakers to block efforts to replace the current five-year leasing plan.

Though Gov. Nikki Haley continues to support offshore oil exploration, South Carolina's coastal congressmen — Republicans Mark Sanford and Tom Rice and Democrat James Clyburn — oppose it.

And so does Lt. Gov. Henry McMaster, who will become governor in February if Mrs. Haley is confirmed, as expected, to be the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations.

Meanwhile, several permits for seismic surveying, which uses air guns to produce powerful blasts to probe the ocean floor for pockets of oil, also are pending before BOEM, the agency within the Interior Department responsible for offshore leases. Almost all who oppose drilling off South Carolina also oppose seismic testing.

Make no mistake: Republican congressional leaders and the incoming administration plan to unfetter Big Oil and "cancel job-killing regulations," as President-elect Donald Trump has promised.

South Carolina's coastal residents and their elected representatives in local jurisdictions demonstrated their capacity to galvanize action against offshore drilling over the last two years.

They shouldn't hesitate to take up the fight once again.

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