

# The Virginian-Pilot

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## Virginian-Pilot editorial: A circuitous path to offshore drilling opposition

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DRILLING FOR oil and gas off Virginia Beach has always presented all kinds of risks and few potential benefits.

That's something the military has known for a decade. The Pentagon bases a huge proportion of its flying and sailing assets in Hampton Roads, where they drive the economy and the culture. Thousands upon thousands of sailors, soldiers and Marines call this region home, at least in part because every branch of the military trains in the Atlantic Ocean off Virginia.

Considering that Department of Defense spending represents somewhere around 40 percent of the regional economy, you would expect the Pentagon's opinion on offshore drilling to carry considerable weight.

It hasn't. Until this year.

In 2006, the Pentagon said that "[b]ecause hazards in this area to operating crews and oil company equipment and structures would be so great, the [Defense] Department opposes oil and gas development activity in this ... location" off Virginia.

In 2010, the Pentagon reiterated those concerns: "We have determined that 72 [percent] of the Lease Sale 220 area [off Virginia] should have no oil and gas activity due to our intensive training and testing in the area and the danger this would present to oil and

gas industry personnel and property. We also conduct carrier pilot qualification training in this area and that requires extensive and unrestricted sea room for the carriers to maneuver during launch and recovery of aircraft.”

Then of course, there’s the ever-present danger of an oil spill, or worse.

The 2010 Deepwater Horizon blowout in the Gulf of Mexico killed 11 people. It was also an object lesson in the damage that can be done to a place’s environment and economy if something goes that horribly wrong. BP said recently that the cost to the company itself has topped \$61 billion.

Almost 5 million barrels of oil spilled into the gulf in the months before that deep well was capped, itself a process that required the invention of new techniques.

The Gulf of Mexico as an environment is still recovering, and will be for years to come. Between the spilled oil and the dispersants designed to speed its breakdown, scientists say that thousands of species were affected by the disaster. It suffocated reefs, damaged wetlands and crippled the gulf’s tourism and seafood industries.

As if the potential damage to the Hampton Roads environment and the tourism industry weren’t enough, the federal scheme for the allocation of oil and gas royalties means that Virginia would receive nothing from the wells off its beaches. Unless, of course, it could convince all the other states to surrender otherwise free money.

The same dynamic would be necessary to fix the offshore territory maps that shortchange Virginia at the expense of North Carolina and Maryland.

The chances of a more favorable royalty scheme or new maps were somewhere between none and zero, as years of effort by multiple members of Congress from Virginia have made abundantly clear.

Still, despite all that, most elected officials in Virginia — Democrat and Republican — continued to support drilling: Govs. Mark Warner, Tim Kaine, Bob McDonnell and Terry McAuliffe; U.S. Reps. Scott Rigell and Randy Forbes; much of the Hampton Roads legislative delegation, too.

Over the weekend, Kaine — now running mate to Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton — became the latest to change his mind on drilling. He now joins Warner in opposition. Even Forbes, during his campaign to succeed Rigell in the 2nd District, said he opposed drilling.

Virginia Beach's City Council, which inexplicably supported drilling when asked to do so by then-Gov. McDonnell, is now pulling back. Legislators, too.

In each case, the military's opposition — reiterated this spring — helped drive the change of heart. Except the Pentagon's opposition to offshore drilling hasn't meaningfully changed in a decade.

Americans should celebrate whenever a politician arrives at the right position on a contentious subject. But they are also right to wonder why now and why not then.

[http://pilotonline.com/opinion/editorial/virginian-pilot-editorial-a-circuitous-path-to-offshore-drilling-opposition/article\\_48c27c95-5d9d-5d1d-8e0f-c5a185d15e58.html](http://pilotonline.com/opinion/editorial/virginian-pilot-editorial-a-circuitous-path-to-offshore-drilling-opposition/article_48c27c95-5d9d-5d1d-8e0f-c5a185d15e58.html)