



Editorial: The fight over offshore drilling

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Let's make the Gulf of Mexico an environmental and economic disaster again!

Nobody in the Trump administration is saying as much, but there is reason to fear that the president's orders to the Interior Department could do just that, by vastly expanding offshore drilling and junking rules designed to prevent a repeat of the calamity associated with the BP Deepwater Horizon explosion and spill.

Talk about not learning from the past, and the not-so-distant past at that.

The April 2010 blowout on the rig 41 miles off the southeast coast of Louisiana dumped 4 million gallons of petroleum into the Gulf, polluting water, killing or harming marine creatures and smothering coastlines. The impacts — on the environment and the economy — caused billions of dollars in damage.

A bipartisan national commission — whose members included Bob Graham, a former Democratic U.S. senator and governor from Florida, and William Reilly, a Republican who administered the Environmental Protection Agency during the first Bush administration — conducted extensive hearings and research and concluded, among other things, that the spill could have been prevented.

The commission recommended the institution of regulations aimed at improving so-called blowout preventers, in order to reduce the chances of a catastrophic spill like the one caused by the Deepwater Horizon. Congress failed to act, but the Obama administration created reasonable rules to implement this and other recommendations.

Yet, as Graham and Reilly wrote in a column for the New York Times, an April 28 executive order issued by President Donald Trump calls for the reconsideration of the "well control rule" that "tightened controls on blowout preventers designed to stop explosions in undersea oil and gas wells."

We recognize that Interior Department officials assert that no decisions have been made in this regard but the mere reconsideration of a key protection — what Graham and Reilly called "the most important action the government has taken to reduce offshore drilling hazards" — is simply reckless and unwarranted.

Furthermore, in response to the April executive order, the Interior Department opened a public comment period for a "new" program for leasing even more public waters —

including those on the outer continental shelf, in the Arctic Ocean and in the eastern Gulf (off Florida's west coast) — for offshore drilling. This program would presumably replace the existing plan, which already includes room for significant expansion of drilling.

Drilling within 125 miles of Florida's Gulf coast has been banned for good reasons under a federal moratorium, approved by Congress in 2006, that was supposed to last at least until 2022 — for environmental and economic reasons, and because the area is vital for military training.

As we have written previously, opposition to additional drilling off Florida's coasts has long been steady and bipartisan. In March, 17 members of Congress representing Florida, Republicans and Democrats, sent a letter putting the secretary of the interior — and, by extension, Trump — on notice: Keep the eastern Gulf of Mexico off limits to drilling for gas and oil, or expect a fight. That fight most assuredly is coming.

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