



Editorial:

## Don't expose Atlantic coast to drilling risks

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With **Republicans** and **Democrats** in Florida and Washington, D.C., fighting like cats and dogs over almost everything, it's notable — and encouraging — when rival party members come together on the right side on an issue.

Recently two U.S. House members — Republican John Rutherford of Jacksonville and Democrat Don Beyer of Virginia — co-authored a letter to U.S. Interior Secretary **Ryan Zinke** declaring “strong opposition” to opening waters off the Atlantic Coast to exploration for oil and natural gas. The letter warned that even the first step toward offshore drilling, seismic surveys using airguns to locate subsea oil and gas deposits, would threaten “the vibrant Atlantic Cost economies dependent on healthy ocean ecosystems, which generate \$95 billion in gross domestic product and support nearly 1.4 million jobs each year.”

The letter drew signatures from more than 100 U.S. House members, including 21 of the 27 from Florida — 11 Democrats and 10 Republicans. The group included a half-dozen members with all or parts of their districts in Central Florida: Democrats Darren Soto and Val Demings of Orlando and Stephanie Murphy of Winter Park; and Republicans **Dennis Ross** of Lakeland, **Bill Posey** of Rockledge and **Ron DeSantis** of Palm Coast. Those three Republicans, as well as Rutherford, are conservatives and normally aligned on issues with President Donald Trump. We urge another GOP ally of the president, Gov. Rick Scott, to join them in standing up for Florida's Atlantic Coast.

After the president issued an executive order on April 28 for an “America First Offshore Energy Strategy,” Zinke cleared the way for the National Marine Fisheries Service to give preliminary authorization on June 5 to five companies to conduct seismic airgun

surveys for oil and gas off the Atlantic Coast. Final approval of those permits, which could come later this month after a public comment period ends, would allow ships to traverse Atlantic waters from New Jersey to Florida for months towing two to three dozen airguns. Each of those airguns would create underwater explosions of up to 180 decibels five or six times a minute, so that submerged microphones could locate subsea oil and gas deposits by measuring the echoes.

What's the problem? In multiple studies, scientists have found evidence that these explosions disturb or kill marine life as small as plankton and as large as whales. Rutherford and Beyer cited a 2014 study that found reef fish off North Carolina declined by 78 percent during seismic testing compared with their peak hours when tests weren't being conducted. As the congressmen added, "The tertiary effects of this trickle down to fishing businesses, restaurants and the visitors that flock to our coastal communities." Fewer fish mean fewer fishermen and fewer tourists.

Rutherford and Beyer also rebutted an argument that seismic surveys would at least provide coastal communities with data about oil and gas deposits off their shores so they could decide whether it makes economic sense to move forward with drilling for those resources. The congressmen wrote that information from the surveys is considered proprietary, and is only available to the oil and gas industry. Local decision makers don't have access to it. Not even members of Congress can get their hands on it.

While environmental groups have lined up against seismic testing and offshore oil drilling in the Atlantic, an organization called the Business Alliance for Protecting the Atlantic Coast has been spearheading the opposition to the Trump administration's policy. The alliance claims the support of 41,000 businesses and 500,000 commercial fishing families. "There is no separation between the interests of environmentalists and the business community," one of the organization's directors, Frank Knapp Jr., recently told *The Atlantic*.

U.S. oil and gas production is already booming. The federal Energy Information Administration has predicted that the nation will be a net energy exporter within a decade. It's neither necessary nor rational to endanger the environment, the economy and the way of life of coastal communities in Florida or anywhere else on the Atlantic seaboard by expanding offshore drilling.