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Offshore 101: Lifting ban would threaten ecosystems, marine life

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Before drilling for natural gas off Virginia's coast, Virginians need to decide what they are willing to risk, and lose, and then determine what is really in the best interest of Virginia.

Currently, there is a federal moratorium on offshore drilling that must be re-enacted by Congress every year in the Interior Appropriations bill. The moratorium enjoys widespread, bipartisan support.

Last year I, and the entire Hampton Roads delegation in the U.S. House of Representatives, voted to keep the moratorium in place. In fact, President Bush has expressed support for the moratorium every year he submits his budget. The moratorium protects all of our nation's coasts and waters, especially our own Chesapeake Bay.

This year SB262, the Virginia Energy Plan, was introduced in the General Assembly. That bill includes a provision calling for Virginia to seek an exemption from the federal moratorium on offshore drilling.

The offshore drilling provision in the bill is a provision that has no legally binding effect, other than encouraging the governor's office to ask Virginia's congressional delegation to seek something that is contrary to the best interest of Virginia.

However, this is still a dangerous path to take, and in fact, one that has already been explored without success.

In the 1970s, before the enactment of the federal moratorium on offshore drilling, five lease sales occurred in the Mid-Atlantic and 32 exploratory wells were drilled with no commercial discoveries. So why go down this fruitless path again? We shouldn't.

Virginia has little to gain and a lot to lose if we decide to drill off our coast. According to the Department of Interior's Mineral Management Service, the Mid-Atlantic planning region has a high potential for "environmental sensitivity."

It is important to understand that even preliminary exploration has its risks. To determine the location of a potential natural gas deposit, seismic surveys must be conducted of the ocean floor. An air gun is usually used to set off a powerful sound source in the ocean. As the sound wave bounces back from rock layers beneath the sea floor, the survey can determine the depth and properties of the rock layers. Many marine mammals, such as dolphins, avoid these areas within five miles of the surveying activity, and some fish can be killed if they're too close.

Furthermore, just drilling an exploratory well may do great harm to our coastal marine environment. One exploratory well alone contains as much as 3,200 cubic meters of rock and mud. Much of this rock and mud will be left to accumulate on the seabed floor, destroying many marine ecosystems.

SB262 calls for the exploration of natural gas only and not oil. But a "natural gas only" exploration proposal is logistically questionable. Are we to believe that if oil were discovered in the search for natural gas that we would seal the well and move on?

The potential of disturbing oil deposits, intentional or not, creates a bigger environmental concern: the potential for a blowout. In 1969, an oil drilling platform suffered a blowout off the coast of Santa Barbara, Calif., allowing 3 million gallons of crude oil to gush out into the Pacific Ocean and destroying whole marine ecosystems.

It took 11 days to seal the well with cement, and weeks later the well began to leak again. An 800-square-mile oil slick formed on the surface and was eventually carried onto 35 miles of California's beaches. The resort beaches in Virginia Beach would easily be overtaken if this were to happen off our coast. Moreover, incoming tides would bring the problem right into the Chesapeake Bay, the nation's largest and most productive estuary.

Since my days in the Assembly, I have worked on legislation to help restore the Bay. In Congress, I am the co-chair of the bipartisan congressional Chesapeake Bay Task Force. The time and money that local, state, and federal agencies, as well as non-government groups, have devoted to cleaning up the Chesapeake Bay could all be lost by one mishap on a drilling platform.

As the debate on drilling off our coast continues, we need to remember how important our coast and the Bay are to the economy and the people of Hampton Roads and the commonwealth . Marine ecosystems, marine life, and our coastal beaches and other beaches along the Bay are a vital natural, economic, and recreational resource that we should never take for granted or put at risk.

We have too much to lose and too little to gain if Virginia were exempted from the federal moratorium on offshore drilling.

Rep. Bobby Scott, a Democrat, represents Virginia's 3rd District.

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