

Orlando Sentinel

New oil proposal ignores Deepwater Horizon lessons



Columnist: Using seismic blasts to map oil risks more devastation to marine life.

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Guest columnist
April 19, 2015

It's been five years since the start of the worst environmental catastrophe in American history — the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. Yet President Obama's plan to open the Atlantic coast to new offshore drilling makes it painfully evident that we've either learned nothing from the disaster or already forgotten everything about it.

As the fifth anniversary of BP's Deepwater Horizon oil spill looms, BP is once again ramping up its impressive public-relations machine with commercials featuring sparkling Gulf waters, vibrant sandy

beaches, and tourists gobbling down fresh-caught seafood. The propaganda is intended to comfort us that all is well, while ignoring the truth that the Gulf has not recovered, and in fact, may never be the same.

The Deepwater Horizon disaster spilled more than 200 million gallons of oil into the Gulf of Mexico for months while BP frantically tried to control the wild well. The explosion killed 11 men; the oil spill killed hundreds of thousands of dolphins, birds and other wildlife. The clean-up efforts also came with high environmental costs: Controlled burns captured and burned alive oil-soaked sea turtles, and chemical dispersants are still having untold and likely underestimated effects on fish and coral.

The Gulf's coastal economy still has not recovered. Fishermen, coastal towns, casinos, hotels and restaurants are still struggling to get up after BP's 2010 deadly mistake — one that shocked the public. We now know offshore drilling carries these risks.

The BP spill should have been a wake-up call for federal and state governments that allow inherently dangerous offshore oil and gas development, but now, the Obama administration is about to start another game of Russian roulette — this

time with Florida's East Coast. On Tuesday, the U.S. Bureau of Ocean Energy Management will hold a public hearing in Jacksonville on the use of deafening seismic blasts to find and map oil off the Atlantic coast. Seismic surveys use noise as loud as jet engines to map the ocean floor by blasting airguns nearly nonstop for days, weeks and even months.

The government's own scientists estimate the surveys would "disrupt" the breeding, feeding and migration of marine wildlife 13.5 million times, and injure more than 138,000 dolphins and whales. This includes nine endangered North Atlantic right whales, whose only known calving grounds are off the coast of St. Augustine, along the southern edge of the proposed blast zone.

Most of the Atlantic has been off-limits to new oil platforms, but the latest proposal to develop new offshore fossil-fuel-extraction facilities places Florida and much of the Eastern seaboard at risk of oil spills that would be devastating to the region's economic and environmental health.

In the short term, seismic surveys endanger thousands of dolphins, whales and other marine mammals. In the long term, expanded offshore-oil production has the potential to foul Florida's beaches and worsen climate change. Opening up the south Atlantic to seismic surveying is a lose-lose proposal.

But it's not too late. The public can still tell the Obama administration and Gov. Rick Scott that we want to keep our oceans for swimming, fishing, surfing, sailing and watching wildlife. Our coastal animals and economies are too important to gamble on the chance of making oil companies richer.

The BP spill was the worst environmental disaster in U.S. history, but Florida escaped relatively unscathed. We may not be so lucky next time. And with all the uncertainty surrounding oil development in our oceans, one thing is certain: There will be a next time.