

Protect our Atlantic coastline

BY FRANK KNAPP JR.

President Trump recently proclaimed that his administration is seeking “American energy dominance.” The reality is we’re already there.

The United States produces more natural gas and oil than any other nation. We do import about 25 percent of our oil needs, mostly from Canada and Mexico. However, that’s only because we export about one million gallons a week of the type of domestically produced oil we don’t want. The U.S. is beholden to no other country for our energy security.

If these facts come as a surprise to you, then you are ripe for being deceived by those who want to use airgun blasting to explore for oil and gas off the Atlantic Coast. The petroleum industry and its allies are trying to convince you that current technology and procedures for testing for offshore oil and gas deposits are safe. If we find any amount, they will want to drill for it. Not for our consumption but, according to the Trump administration’s announced plans, to export for geopolitical purposes.

To move this agenda forward, the Trump administration has fast-tracked the process for approving applications from seismic testing companies. The vessels used for this process pull large arrays of airguns that fire every 10 to 12 seconds, 24 hours a day for months and each firing creates the loudest noise in the ocean. The data obtained from this survey technique is used to project where oil deposits might be and how much might be there. Then test wells are drilled to verify the data.

The Deepwater Horizon oil rig was drilling a test well in the Gulf of Mexico when it created the largest oil spill ever.

Setting aside the ultimate, unwanted purpose for seismic testing in the Atlantic, exploration using airguns under current regulations itself is not safe. Research has clearly demonstrated that this old technology is very harmful to marine life, a fact that was cited by the Obama administration as one of the reasons it denied seismic testing permits for the Atlantic just six months ago.

The government estimates that up to 138,000 whales and dolphins could be injured or harassed if seismic airgun blasting was allowed in the Atlantic. This is hardly an insignificant number. Regulations to try to mitigate the harm to marine mammals from seismic airgun blasting are ridiculously

insufficient. Seismic vessels are to place an observer with binoculars on the deck to advise if they see a whale or dolphin, which supposedly results in the airguns being stopped.

The government doesn't even try to estimate the number of fish and invertebrates killed or harassed due to seismic airgun blasting. Ironically, in spite of its name the federal agency that approves applications for seismic testing, the National Marine Fisheries Service, requires absolutely no procedures to reduce the destructive impact of airguns on fish and invertebrates like squid. Yet it is the seismic airgun blasting on these marine animals that causes the most economic damage to local communities and their businesses.

Research has shown that seismic airgun blasting reduces commercial catches of cod and haddock by 40-80 percent. Other commercial fish are similarly impacted. When the local commercial fishermen along the Atlantic Coast can't deliver the fresh catch to shore, they make less money, seafood processors have less business and seafood markets and restaurants have less to sell and do so at a higher price.

Our commercial fishing industry and the consumers should not be asked to financially sacrifice so that seismic companies and Big Oil can make more profits and President Trump can export any oil recovered to other countries.

The concerned public still has a chance to slow down and even derail the administration's planned war against the Atlantic marine life and our local coastal economies.

Comments are still being taken until July 21st. Send your comments to: Jolie Harrison, Chief, Permits and Conservation Division, Office of Protected Resources, National Marine Fisheries Service, 1315 East-West Highway, Silver Spring, MD 20910. Or email to: ITP.Laws@noaa.gov

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