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Business Leaders Write To Obama Urging Him To Not Allow Drilling In The Atlantic

BY KATIE VALENTINE SEP 10, 2015 2:44PM

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Beachgoers in Avon, North Carolina. Many businesses along the Atlantic Coast worry that opening up the ocean to drilling would be bad for the tourism business.

For coastal companies that depend on a healthy stream of tourists to keep business healthy, the prospect of drilling in the Atlantic Ocean means one thing: spills that will sully beaches and drive visitors away.

More than 300 Atlantic coast businesses sent a [letter](#) to President Obama Thursday, urging him to take back his administration's proposal to allow drilling in the Atlantic Ocean. In January, the Obama administration [announced](#) a proposal to sell oil and gas leases in offshore sites from Virginia to Georgia. Currently, there is no offshore drilling in the Atlantic Ocean, though drilling does occur in the Gulf of Mexico.

In the letter, the businesses outline the economic risk posed by offshore drilling, saying that monetary losses due to lost tourism revenue could be "devastating." They also note that the Energy Information Administration [estimates](#) that the Atlantic Ocean holds only about 209 days' worth of oil and 13 months' worth of natural gas.

"Offshore drilling is incompatible with our tourism and fishing industries. When you drill, you spill, and day to day drilling operations result in chronic pollution and the industrialization of the coast for oil facilities," the letter reads. "Look no further than the devastation the BP Deepwater Horizon catastrophe brought to the Gulf of Mexico's fishing, tourism and wildlife to recognize the impact

drilling would have here on the Atlantic Coast.”

Jeff Downey, owner of the Savannah, Georgia restaurant Circa 1875 and one of the signatories of the letter, said on a press call Thursday that about 85 percent of his business during the summer comes from tourists.

“If they allow offshore drilling, it will ruin our coasts first of all, and people will just stop coming,” he said. Savannah is in a hurricane zone, he said, and though hurricanes there have been rare over the last century, he worries a major storm could damage a drilling rig and cause a spill.

Cola Vaughan, owner of Cola Vaughan Realty on North Carolina’s Outer Banks, was another one of the business owners who signed on to the letter. He said businesses in the Outer Banks depend heavily on pristine beaches to attract visitors, and that even a “perceived threat” of spills would cause potential vacationers to think twice about choosing the Outer Banks. Even after the Deepwater Horizon disaster, he said, he had potential visitors contacting him, worried that oil could travel from the Louisiana Coast up to North Carolina.

“Our entire society, really, is based on a clean beach. There’s nobody living here whose economic situation isn’t directly related to the state and condition and health of our local beaches,” he said. If those beaches aren’t clean, people won’t visit. “I think it’s a reckless gamble,” he said.

It makes sense for businesses to be worried about a major spill. The Deepwater Horizon disaster, which killed 11 people and sent millions of barrels of oil into the Gulf of Mexico, took a toll on Gulf businesses. An estimated \$22.7 billion in Gulf tourism money was lost from 2010 through 2013 because of the spill.

“Tourism was impacted severely — the beach economy of Alabama and Florida basically went away,” Jonathan Henderson, coastal resiliency organizer at the Gulf Restoration Network said on the call.

Other coastal industries also took a hit. Five years later, some crabbers are still struggling, drawing in fewer crabs than usual, and overall, the Gulf of Mexico commercial fishing industry lost an estimated \$247 million after fisheries were closed post-spill.

The Obama administration’s proposal, which would allow the government to conduct one Atlantic lease sale sometime between 2017 and 2022, has run into opposition before. Multiple Democrats in the Senate oppose it, and numerous East Coast cities have passed resolutions against oil exploration and drilling. Some governors, including North Carolina Gov. Pat McCrory and Virginia Gov. Terry McAuliffe, support the drilling, however.

The 300 businesses hope adding their names to the opposition will help convince the administration to give up plans for Atlantic drilling.

“Our coasts are worth too much to risk,” they write in the letter. “Rather than exposing our beaches, families and businesses to the inherent risks of drilling, we need to move this country in the direction of renewable energy.”