INTRODUCTION:
Since the Trump Administration rolled out its plan to open the entire Atlantic coast to offshore drilling for oil, every governor of Atlantic coast states has come out in opposition to the proposal, except two...Maine’s Gov. Paul LePage and Georgia’s Gov. Nathan Deal. Gov. Deal has remained conspicuously silent on the issue despite opposition to the proposal from numerous coastal communities as well as a contingent of a dozen state legislators. Offshore drilling and the seismic testing used to locate oil reserves pose serious threats to marine wildlife as well as the coast’s natural beauty and the state’s tourism and seafood industries.

THE WATER BODY:
Georgia’s 100-mile coast is a destination and desirable place to live. Home to some 650,000 residents, it hosts an estimated 15 million visitors annually, bound for the state’s beautiful beaches and historic cities. These natural amenities support 24,000 tourism and fisheries jobs for Georgia citizens. Wildlife also flocks to the Georgia coast. Federally endangered North Atlantic right whales use Georgia’s coastal waters as their birthing suite each winter, while threatened sea turtles clamber up the state’s beaches to lay eggs during the spring and summer. Meanwhile from the sky, millions of migratory birds, seabirds and shorebirds refuel and refuge in the area’s 368,000 acres of salt marsh and 100 miles of coastline. Recognized as a globally significant ecosystem, Georgia’s coast is one of the state’s signature landscapes.

THE DIRT:
Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said that there comes a time when “silence is betrayal.” The civil rights leader’s words might well apply to Gov. Nathan Deal when it comes to the issue of drilling for fossil fuels on Georgia’s coast.

Though all 12 of Georgia’s coastal legislators sponsored and endorsed resolutions opposing oil and gas drilling activities on the coast; though city leaders in Savannah, Richmond Hill, Brunswick, Hinesville,
Kingsland, Thunderbolt, Tybee Island and St. Marys have all adopted resolutions opposing offshore oil exploration; though about 5,000 Georgians have petitioned Gov. Deal to oppose offshore drilling; and though 12 other Atlantic coast governors have stated their opposition, Gov. Deal has yet to take a stand on the Trump Administration’s proposal to open the entire eastern seaboard to oil exploration.

In February, Gov. Deal expressed concerns about Georgia’s coastal tourism industry and requested that the Department of Natural Resources conduct a study on the “viability and risks associated with offshore drilling.” That study is expected to be completed soon.

Likewise, the U.S. Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM) is expected to release a draft of its offshore oil and gas development plan before year’s end, at which time, the public will have the opportunity to comment on the proposal. The plan will govern offshore energy development from 2019-2024.

In opposing offshore drilling, coastal legislators and locally-elected officials cited the risk of oil spills and their impact on the coast’s tourism and fishing industry as well as the impact onshore infrastructure to support oil rigs might have on the “character of our coastal landscapes and our communities.”

Legislators also cited the risks to marine life posed by seismic testing. In this testing, air guns are used to blast sound down to the seabed to detect the location of oil and gas deposits. Those blasts can disturb marine wildlife more than 100 miles away. A 2014 environmental study by BOEM estimated that 138,000 marine animals will be harmed from seismic testing, resulting in disruptions to their migration, feeding or other behavioral patterns.

Most at risk are the federally endangered North Atlantic right whales (Georgia’s official marine mammal) which travel to the Georgia coast each winter to give birth. Scientists believe that fewer than 400 of these animals still exist, and whale experts have warned that seismic testing could lead to the extinction of these 40-foot-long, 150,000-pound mammals.

Further studies have shown that in areas where seismic testing has occurred, commercial catch rates have plummeted by as much as 80 percent, and zooplankton, the base of the ocean food chain, are decimated within three-quarters of a mile from the point of the seismic blasts.

WHAT MUST BE DONE:
Legally, the BOEM must confer with all coastal state governors before finalizing the federal plan for offshore drilling on the Atlantic coast. Gov. Deal should use that opportunity to support his coastal constituents in opposing oil and gas exploration. When the BOEM releases its draft plan, Georgians and their leaders should voice their opposition to any proposal that includes oil and gas exploration on the coast.

Top: Opponents of offshore drilling fear that onshore infrastructure to support coastal oil rigs could negatively impact the natural beauty of Georgia’s coast. This facility looms over the Gulf Coast near New Orleans. Above left: Georgia’s coast, with 14 primary barrier islands and some 368,000 acres of salt marsh, is a natural playground. These amenities help support 24,000 tourism and fisheries jobs for Georgia’s citizens.

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