Fish, Game and Forestry Committee

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July 10, 2019

The Honorable David Bernhardt
Secretary of the Interior
United States Department of the Interior
1849 C Street, N.W.
Washington, DC 20240

Hand Delivered

Re: Request to Exempt South Carolina from Offshore Oil & Gas Leasing Program

Mr. Secretary:

Thank you for your distinguished record of natural resource stewardship during your service in the Department of the Interior and Commonwealth of Virginia. As an avid hunter, fisherman, surfer, and sportsman I share your passion for the outdoors. As a South Carolina State Senator and Chairman of the Fish, Game & Forestry Committee, I likewise labor to ensure future generations have the same opportunities to explore the great outdoors you and I have so richly enjoyed.

This year, South Carolina governmental bodies at all levels took strong stands against seismic testing and offshore drilling.

During the 2019 legislative session, I introduced a budget proviso prohibiting the issuance of state and local permits for infrastructure and other activities related to offshore drilling and seismic testing. Thirty-three of forty-six Senators signed on as co-sponsors. It passed the Senate—where Republicans hold a 27 to 19 majority—by a resounding vote of 40 to 4. The proviso passed into law on May 29 with strong support from Republican Governor Henry McMaster, Republican Attorney General Alan Wilson, and a bi-partisan coalition in the House of Representatives, where Republicans hold an 80 to 44 majority.

In a letter dated July 8, 2019, the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control ("SCDHEC") objected to a federal applicant's consistency certification for proposed seismic testing. Over 1700 public comments were received. All were opposed to seismic testing. None were supportive. Citing these comments, recently published scientific literature, and statements provided by the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources, SCDHEC found seismic testing to be inconsistent with South Carolina's Coastal Zone Management Program due to potential adverse impacts—known and unknown—to coastal resources and uses.

Almost one-half of South Carolina's coast lies in my 85-mile long Senate district. The twelve coastal municipalities and three counties in the district have adopted resolutions opposing offshore drilling. The anti-drilling sentiment is very strong and growing stronger by the day.

South Carolina is uniquely blessed with pristine and protected natural resources, world-class resorts, and rich cultural and historic resources. One-third of our coast is permanently protected from development. We have a $23 billion travel and tourism industry, with 75% of it along the coast. Our coastal barrier islands command some of the highest real estate values on the Atlantic seaboard. Hunting, fishing, agriculture, and eco-tourism are valued at over $33 billion annually. My hometown of Charleston is repeatedly ranked the number one travel destination in the United States and, at times, the world.

Offshore drilling, and the inevitable coastal industrialization it brings are wholly incompatible with these drivers of our economy, these current land uses, and our way of life. The coastal industrialization attendant to offshore drilling would devastate our coastal resources and thereby impair our coastal economy. The two are inextricably intertwined.

John Sawhill, former President of The Nature Conservancy and New York University said, "A society is defined not only by what it creates, but also by what it refuses to destroy." Our economy is, in large part, about what we create. Offshore oil would threaten much of what we currently create because of the incompatibility of oil-related infrastructure with current drivers of our economy such as tourism, real estate, and fisheries.

But offshore drilling would utterly devastate what we South Carolinians have consciously and methodically refused to destroy. We determined decades ago to preserve and protect entire coastal ecosystems. And their preservation has made the coastal places we develop some of the highest valued real estate and most coveted vacation spots in the country.

We have saved entire coastal ecosystems through what I call "collaborative conservation." Public and private partnerships and funding have accomplished conservation on an ecosystem-wide scale by negotiation and compensation, not regulation. This approach is embodied in the South Carolina Conservation Bank Act, which I authored and was first funded in 2004. Its incentives-based approach has protected over 300,000 acres at less than $500/acre.

Our uniquely South Carolina approach to conservation has protected large swaths of coastal resources. Resources such as the 55 miles of coast from the Winyah Bay Focus Area to Dewees Island, and 300,000 protected acres in the historic ACE Basin. The ACE Basin Initiative, which formalized ACE Basin conservation efforts, celebrates its 30th anniversary this year.

Mr. Secretary, South Carolinians consciously refused to destroy— and instead protect—these special coastal places decades ago. Please do not destroy them now with the onset of offshore oil and its incompatible land-based infrastructure. I suggest South Carolina's coastal conservation efforts are so profound, extensive, and unique that you would conclude they warrant special protection from offshore drilling and seismic testing if you afforded me the privilege of showing them to you.

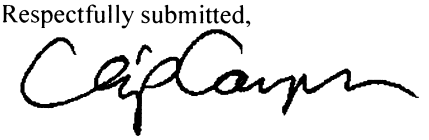
I recently hosted a *Wall Street Journal* reporter and photographer on an extensive tour of our coast. They wanted me to introduce them to Republican business people who found my argument against offshore drilling persuasive. But most importantly, they wanted to see and experience what I am trying to protect. From Winyah Bay to the ACE Basin, I shared with them the places, people, history, and culture of South Carolina's pristine coast. I contextualized the tour with personal stories from a lifetime of adventures hunting, fishing, surfing, and exploring the coast.

I would enjoy hosting you on a coastal tour similar to the one I conducted for the *Wall Street Journal*. I am confident you would find it beneficial in making important decisions regarding offshore drilling. As a fellow outdoorsman and steward of natural resources, you would undoubtedly appreciate the scope, majesty, history, and unique approach to conservation that has protected, in Sawhill's words, that which South Carolina has "refused to destroy."

I respectfully request you exercise discretion pursuant to 43 U.S.C. § 1344 and exempt the coast of South Carolina from the 2019-2024 oil and gas leasing program. The case for granting the exemption is the pristine natural resources, alluring culture, rich history, and tremendous effort exerted by public-private partnerships to attain unprecedented levels of protection for South Carolina's coast. Experiencing all of this by touring our coast will speak louder than any number of words. I would be honored if you would take me up on my offer.

Thank you for your consideration and continued commitment to public service and stewardship of our natural resources.

Respectfully submitted,



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