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Bush lays down gauntlet on drilling

This proposal is about national and economic security

The Upstate's congressmen -- as well as the state's two U.S. senators -- were quick to applaud President Bush's recent decision to lift the ban on offshore drilling. But the Republican officials are not likely to prevail in a Democratic-controlled Congress.

That's unfortunate because drilling for oil and natural gas could move this nation toward greater energy independence. At a time of soaring gas prices, getting rid of the ban might provide little immediate relief at the pump, but it could help shore up the nation's energy needs in the future.

Bush lifted the executive ban on offshore drilling, but the legislative ban remains in place. Most of the nation's coastline has been off-limits for drilling since the congressional ban was imposed in 1981. But polls show that two-thirds of Americans favor new drilling for oil and gas. Proposals generally call for offshore drilling to take place 50 miles or more off the coast.

At least 18 billion barrels of oil and 77 trillion cubic feet of natural gas can be produced from areas that are off-limits, according to the Minerals Management Service of the U.S. Department of the Interior. However, those estimates are considered extremely conservative because they are based on surveys that, in some cases, are more than 30 years old. Since that time, new technology has made oil easier to locate and extract, according to the Minerals Management Service.

Critics of expanding offshore drilling express concerns about oil spills, but improvements in technology -- such as automatic shutoff valves on the seabed floor -- also have made those accidents less likely to occur. During hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005, 115 oil platforms were damaged but only insignificant amounts of oil spilled, according to USA Today.

Countries such as Norway and Brazil that don't have to contend with such bans have found large and lucrative oil deposits offshore. Likewise, U.S. states could benefit handsomely from offshore drilling. Louisiana, where offshore drilling has taken place since 1947, currently nets about \$1.5 billion annually in oil and gas revenue, according to USA Today.

Upstate Rep. Bob Inglis, while supporting offshore drilling, was right to urge the development of alternative energy sources as well.

"We need more oil to replace the declining production from existing domestic wells," Inglis said in a statement. "My main concern is that we drill for innovation much more passionately than we drill for oil."

S.C. Sens. Jim DeMint and Lindsey Graham both issued statements strongly supportive of offshore drilling.

"I applaud the president for leading the way by ending the executive ban, and now it's time for Democrats in Congress to stop playing political games and allow an immediate up-or-down vote to end the federal ban on offshore drilling," said DeMint in a statement.

"There is no doubt we need more domestic exploration," said Graham in a press release. "Every barrel of oil we can find in America will be one less we have to compete with China and India for or be

subject to OPEC price setting."

Weaning the nation off foreign oil is not only about lowering gas prices, of course, but also about being less dependent on oil-producing nations in war-torn and volatile regions of the world. Americans should be encouraged to conserve, and research into alternative fuels deserves aggressive federal support. But oil is certain to remain an important part of America's energy resources. The more energy-independent America can be, the better for our national and economic security.
