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EDITORIAL

THOUGHTS ON THE PROSPECTS FOR OFFSHORE OIL AND GAS DRILLING IN THE ATLANTIC OCEAN

As noted in this issue of the Environmental Practice News, the prospects are favorable that exploration for oil and gas deposits on the Atlantic seabed will soon be in high gear. Although the first sale of Atlantic oil and gas leases has dealt with lands offshore of New Jersey and Delaware, the onshore effects of drilling for oil and gas will be felt along a much broader stretch of the Atlantic seaboard. Even if the location of these leases makes it unlikely that oil spills will be broadly dispersed along the Atlantic coast, the onshore facilities needed to support offshore oil and gas development and production may be widely scattered among several coastal states. An example of this phenomenon is the proposal to construct a 2,000 acre fabrication yard for building offshore oil and gas platforms in Northampton County, Virginia. Thus, although Northampton County may not face the danger of an oil spill reaching its shores from the lease area, the County may well feel the effect of offshore activity through new demands on land use and public services caused by the fabrication yard.

Of course, there is no guarantee that large-scale onshore development in the Atlantic states will ever occur. Even if some oil and gas is discovered in the lease area, quantities may not be sufficient for economical recovery and processing. Industry and government officials have noted that the most valuable resource in the lease area may be gas and not oil. If this is

the case the alarm of many may be unjustified, since onshore facility requirements and dangers to the physical environment are lower for the recovery and processing of gas than those for oil.

Should commercially acceptable quantities of offshore oil and gas be discovered in the Atlantic, onshore impacts will be experienced most strongly in the coastal zone. The state regulatory programs bearing the brunt of this challenge will be the newly emerging coastal resource plans funded under the federal Coastal Zone Management Act. These new programs may thus be meeting their greatest test in their infancy.

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