INTRODUCTION
The Trump administration is proposing to open nearly all U.S. waters to offshore oil and gas drilling and seismic surveys—unleashing the full influence of oil and gas exploration and production on the nation’s coastlines. This is a major shift in national policy. To date, no producing oil or gas wells have ever been drilled off of our coast. At the same time, the federal administration is rolling back safety regulations put in place after the BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill disaster. Offshore drilling is not worth the risk to Virginia’s coastal communities, military preparedness, local and state economies, and marine environment.

BACKGROUND
THE THREAT TO VIRGINIA’S COMMUNITIES
Roughly 230 communities up and down the Atlantic coast have passed anti-drilling resolutions, including major coastal cities like Miami, Savannah, Charleston, Annapolis, and Wilmington. In Virginia dozens of localities along the coast have opposed seismic testing and/or offshore drilling. This includes, among others, the cities of Hampton, Norfolk, Suffolk, Portsmouth, and Virginia Beach; the counties of James City, Isle of Wight, Accomack and Northampton; and the Hampton Roads Planning District Commission which is comprised of elected officials representing each of the 17 localities in Hampton Roads.

In a worst-case scenario, a single oil spill could devastate Virginia’s coastal waters and communities. Routine spills and accidents also pose ongoing environmental and health-related risks, as do onshore infrastructure and activities that accompany the offshore oil and gas industry, such as oil refineries, storage facilities, pipelines, and increased traffic. Increased industrialization and pollution of the coast would forever alter the quality of life for Virginia’s coastal communities.

The projected increase in the number and intensity of storms – both tropical and nor’easters – is also a significant concern, as severe weather would affect the safe operation of oil field support vessels and aircraft. Structures and increased ship and air traffic would have a significant detrimental effect on launching and testing operations at the aerospace Wallops Flight Facility.

THE THREAT TO OUR NATION’S MILITARY
The Department of Defense (DoD) expressed concerns that drilling off Virginia’s coast would interfere with military preparedness. The Hampton Roads Navy bases constitute the largest naval facility in the world and account for 40% of the region’s economy. The Virginia capes Operating Area off the coast provides critical unimpeded access for air, surface, and subsurface training and operations. Likewise, the Air Force utilizes the airspace and conducts air-to-surface training and testing operations off the coast of Virginia. For safety reasons, live weapons testing and training require expansive areas. A DoD report found that nearly three-quarters of the area off Virginia’s coast should be off limits to oil and gas exploration because of interference with military operations.

THE THREAT TO LOCAL ECONOMIES AND COASTAL RESOURCES
Tourism, fishing and recreation are booming industries in Virginia. In 2017, tourism revenue reached nearly $25 billion and supported 122,000 jobs. In Virginia’s coastal region in 2017, tourism generated $5.2 billion in revenue and $49.9 million in state and local taxes. Additionally, over 48,000 jobs and nearly $11 billion in salaries depend on tourism along Virginia’s coast.

Because of this, leading tourism associations like the Virginia Beach Restaurant Association; the Virginia Beach Hotel Association; the statewide Virginia Restaurant, Lodging and Travel Association; and others have joined hundreds of local businesses along the Atlantic coast to oppose offshore drilling.

Virginia is the largest seafood producer on the East Coast and the third largest in the United States. Working watermen landed over 363 million pounds of seafood in 2016 with sales over $1.4 billion. Virginia’s 50 commercial fishery species — including scallops, crabs, clams, flounder, and striped bass — and 11,000 jobs would be at risk from oil spills and ongoing pollution impacts from drilling.

The negative economic impacts of the 2010 BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill disaster are severe and ongoing, with far reaching consequences that are still being discovered, including devastating economic losses, human health impacts, and harmful effects on marine ecosystems. Impacts to fisheries could total $8.7 billion by 2020. Roughly 10 million user-days of beach, surfng, fishing, and boating activity have been lost, with a projected loss of more than 22,000 jobs in fisheries-related sectors.

THE THREAT TO OUR NATION’S MILITARY
Environmental and health-related risks. Virginia should seek to protect our coast through both administrative and legislative actions.

OIL WASHED ASHORE COVERS THE BOOTS OF AN EMERGENCY RESPONSE WORKER. OIL SPILLS AND ACCIDENTS POSE MANY RISKS, INCLUDING ENDANGERING THE ENVIRONMENT AND THE WORKERS CALLED IN TO CLEAN UP. IMAGE CREDIT: SOUTHERN ENVIRONMENTAL LAW CENTER

CONCLUSION
Drilling off Virginia’s coast is incompatible with vibrant, clean beaches and healthy coastal habitat and resources as well as the communities and economies that depend on them. Virginia should seek to protect our coast through both administrative and legislative actions.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS
Repeal Virginia Code section §67-300 A which currently expresses support for drilling 50 miles off the Virginia coast.

Protect Virginia’s coast by prohibiting seismic exploration, offshore drilling, and drilling infrastructure in Virginia’s three nautical miles of territorial waters.