Offshore Drilling Not Worth the Risk:

Protect communities, fisheries, tourism and climate from Big Oil

Is Nova Scotia at risk of a Deepwater Horizon disaster?

BP, the same company responsible for the Deepwater Horizon disaster that saw 4.9 million barrels of oil spilled in the Gulf of Mexico, the death of 11 workers, and devastating consequences for local fisheries, economies and communities, has started offshore drilling near Nova Scotia. Equinor (formerly Statoil) is next in line.

On February 1, 2018, Minister of Environment and Climate Change Catherine McKenna issued a press release that announced BP’s Scotian Basin Exploration Drilling project was “not likely to cause significant adverse environmental effects and the project can proceed.” Only 61 days later, BP spilled 136,000 litres of toxic drilling mud onto the bottom of the Scotian Shelf.

BP has federal approval to drill up to seven exploratory wells between 2018 and 2022. The wells are all on or near the Scotian Shelf, an ecologically significant area in the Atlantic Ocean that is home to whales, seals, sea turtles, fish, corals and birds and successful fisheries.

Faced with massive opposition and having come up dry on its first exploratory well, BP recently scaled back its drilling plans.

Oil and gas exploration has a range of impacts far beyond the nightmarish oil spill scenes from the Deepwater Horizon blowout in 2010. Another impact of drilling is the increase in noise pollution from seismic testing. Dr. Lindy Weilgart, who has studied this topic for 25 years, says Canada does not have laws in place to prevent damage and has opted instead for guidelines that encourage better industry practices. Industry self-regulation rarely results in good behaviour.

While the federal environmental assessment of BP’s plans identify “significant negative environmental effects” as unlikely, the recent drilling mud spill and the devastating 2010 Gulf Coast disaster is a stark reminder that we must always ask: “what risk is acceptable?” The ultra deepwater wells BP has started drilling near Nova Scotia are up to twice as deep as the Deepwater Horizon rig. The unprecedented depth of the wells increases the level of risk. In response to a proposal to open U.S. federal waters to offshore drilling, 12 Republican and Democratic Attorney Generals of coastal states – including those closest to Nova Scotia – have declared the risk “unacceptable” in a letter to the Trump administration.

Recent accidents are a warning of the risks ahead

In June 2018, BP’s ultra-deepwater drilling project had a leak of 136,000 litres of synthetic drilling mud. The Canada Nova Scotia Offshore Petroleum Board’s (CNSOPB) investigation is ongoing, but the board’s initial assessment chalked the spill up to “mechanical failure.” In 2016, a Shell Canada ship faced harsh weather offshore of Nova Scotia while trying to drill an exploratory well and dropped two kilometres of pipe that landed a mere 12 metres from a wellhead. “If they had hit their own wellhead and if they had been at an oil-bearing site in terms of their drilling activity, they would have had a major disaster,” John Davis [Founder and Director, Clean Ocean Action Committee] told DeSmog Canada. “Nothing more than the luck of the draw allowed them to escape that. Nothing to do with their technical capabilities, nothing to do with their safety mechanisms – just plain luck.”
Based on BP’s modelling presented in the federal Environmental Assessment report, a spill from a major blowout could reach the fishing grounds of Emerald Bank in six days and Georges Bank in 20 days. There would be a 50 per cent chance of “shoreline oiling” of Sable Island – a unique island recognized as a national park reserve – in three to six days and there is a 61 per cent chance of surface oiling in the Gully Marine Protected Area in four to seven days. The Gully is home to endangered northern bottlenose whales and other whales and dolphins.

BP estimates it would take between 13 to 25 days to cap a well in a worst case scenario, meaning there would be 13 to 25 days of oil flowing into Nova Scotian waters. The Deepwater Horizon spill lasted almost 90 days. BP would ship a capping stack from Norway in response to a major offshore oil spill. Alaska requires a capping device to be available within 24 hours. The Canadian government ruled out a similar requirement, arguing it would be too expensive for industry. As reported by investigative journalist Antonia Juhasz, “Former BP CEO Tony Hayward admitted in a court deposition [on the Deepwater Horizon disaster] that the company “certainly didn’t have all of the tools” that were necessary to shut in the well, and “[w]e didn’t have a capping stack that would go instantly into place. We didn’t have some of the things that you would ideally want.”

The BP oil spill response strategies have raised concerns. The proposals include the use of booms, which have been found to be only 10 per cent effective in choppy salt water, and chemical dispersants like Corexit. The Deepwater Horizon disaster was the first time Corexit was used on a large scale. As Juhasz also reports, “Only after the experiment [of using Corexit] was well underway would scientists discover just how toxic the dispersant was to humans, wildlife, and vegetation; that the presence of the dispersant reduced the number of naturally occurring microbes that consume oil; the combination of dispersant and oil was more toxic and harmful than either element alone; and that the combination made the oil too liquid for a key containment ship to siphon.”

“Governments grant permits, communities grant permission.” - Justin Trudeau, 2015

While Minister McKenna said there have been “meaningful consultations” about BP’s offshore drilling project, local groups tell a different story. Public hearings were requested, but to date, none have been held.

Indigenous consultation included engagement with Kwilmu’kw Mawklusuaq (KMKNNO), the Mi’gmawe’l Tplu’taqnn Incorporated (MTI), the Assembly of First Nations Chief of New Brunswick, and two bands in PEI. Since the start of drilling and BP’s June 2018 drilling mud spill, many of these groups have decried the CNSOPB consultations and named a distinct lack of faith in the approval process. Grassroots indigenous activists have expressed ongoing concern with the general lack of understanding of the Peace and Friendship Treaties and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as they relate to extraction of offshore resources.

**Trudeau government grants permit**

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**Nova Scotia’s coast is worth protecting**

In 2015, 16,942 people were employed in Nova Scotian fishing-related industries. Nova Scotia’s fish products reached $1.68 billion in total export value. Whale watching, boating and beautiful coastal communities have become important tourist destinations. Tourism revenue in 2016 was an estimated $2.6 billion. Most of the benefits from these industries stay local.

The Trudeau government has justified its approval of the project largely on the premise that a major oil spill is unlikely and its confidence in BP’s preventative and mitigation measures. Critics argue that lobbyists for Big Oil are influencing the government. Since approving the BP project, the Trudeau government has pushed through Bill C-69 to overhaul environmental assessments. Bill C-69 weakens regulations by giving more power to offshore petroleum boards that are made up of unelected political appointees who are primarily oil industry veterans. The petroleum boards were created with a mandate to promote oil and gas development.

**We need to stop digging ourselves deeper into a climate hole**

New fossil fuel projects, particularly unconventional ones such as offshore drilling, are inconsistent with efforts to stay within global climate limits established in the Paris Agreement goals. Offshore drilling near Nova Scotia poses serious risks to water, marine life, fishing industries, tourism and our climate and must not be allowed to proceed. The Council of Canadians has joined with local groups in calling for a moratorium and full public inquiry into the risks of offshore drilling.

**TAKE ACTION**

Visit www.canadians.org/offshore-drilling to find out how you can take action to stop offshore drilling and protect communities, fisheries, tourism and climate from Big Oil.