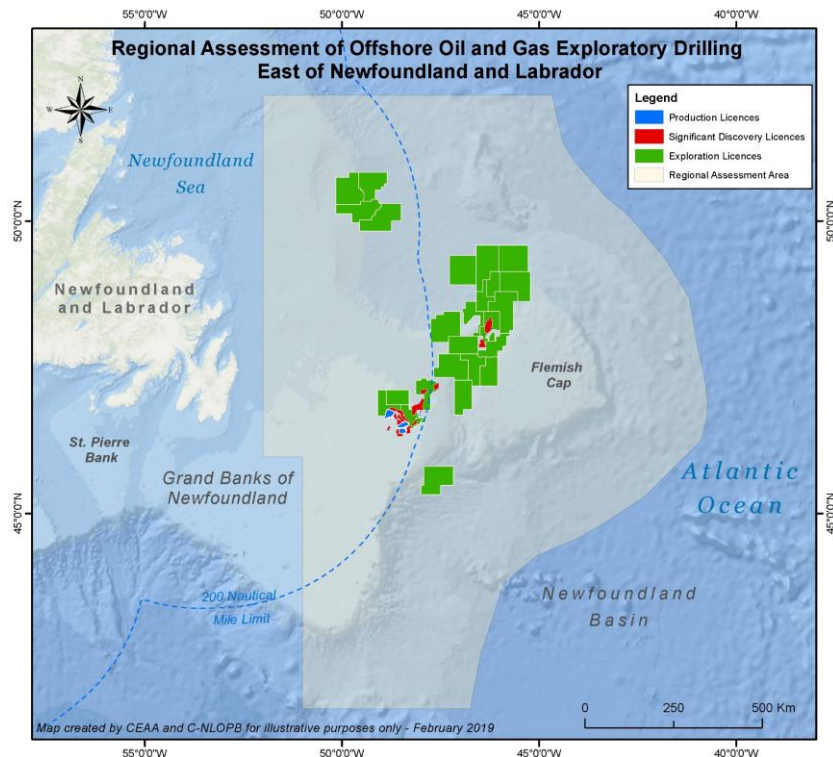


Fast-tracking oil exploration on the Grand Bank

Birds I View

Bill Montevecchi



Eastern Newfoundland Offshore Oil Exploration Area. (Map by CEAA and C-NLOPB)

“Time is money” is a commonly heard adage. Time investment is indeed a major concern for everyone who works. Though we often feel the pressure to finish a job, we know that some things cannot and should not be rushed. The time invested in an endeavor more often than not determines the quality of the outcome.

The “time is money” argument has however also been used conversely to rush work responsibilities. Oil corporation lobbyists and provincial and federal government cheerleaders have flaunted this tactic to speed and indeed eliminate effective environmental assessment of oil exploration on the Grand Bank.

Replacing the process of rigorous ocean environmental assessment with carte blanche ministerial discretion has involved considerable bureaucratic wrangling. Lobbying efforts by oil corporations and acquiescence by the provincial and federal governments have relinquished a rigorous program of environmental assessment under

the responsibility of the Canadian Environmental Assessment Agency (CEAA) with a process of ministerial decree endorsed by newly created Impact Assessment Agency (IAA).

So instead of applying the comprehensive analysis of an environmental assessment to offshore exploration proposals, we now have impact assessments and regional assessments. The very term “environment” has been removed from both the agency and the assessments involved. The deletions are however appropriate, because oil development has the over-riding dominant role in the ministerial decision-making making process.

While the IAA created an impressive GIS-tool that can be used to help gauge environmental interactions on the Grand Bank, the bells and whistles are no substitute for comprehensive environmental assessments. Things change and ocean climate is big one

The developmental bias has been evident through out the entire process, starting with the IAA’s Terms of Reference. The federal ministers of ECCC and Natural Resources and the provincial ministers of Natural Resources and Intergovernmental and Indigenous Affairs gave IAA an objective to – “...Ensure a more predictable and timely regulatory process for future offshore exploration drilling projects and their investors, while also ensuring the environment is protected.” So much for primary focus of an environmental assessment being on the environment and biodiversity.

The primary goal of an environmental assessment must be ensuring adequate environmental and wildlife protection in the face of developmental intervention. However we do longer deal with site-specific environmental assessments but rather with regional and impact assessments.

The developmental bias is pervasive. When reporting to the ministers about new regulations and the creation of a federal ministerial response to replace site-specific environmental assessments, the IAA wrote that they were “...ensuring that highest standards of environmental protection continue to be maintained.” This is confusing because input made to the IAA during public meetings and consultation reports emphasized that the highest standards of environmental protection have not been applied.

Shortcomings of the regulator – the Canada-Newfoundland Offshore Petroleum Board (C-NLOPB) - are well known. They are manifest in the misreporting of oil spills by Exxon-Mobil, the storm-surge spill at the Sea Rose platform, the lack of scientifically justified information about seabird mortality at platforms, the absence of oil company

responses following commitments at C-NLOPB public hearings to mitigate flaring and unnecessary extraneous lighting on platforms, etc.

The contention that the highest standards of environmental protection have been maintained on the Grand Bank is not an objective assessment. It is however now a mantra repeated the by federal and provincial ministers. The telling truth about this bias is that politicians who kowtow to corporate oil do not actually believe that rigorous environmental protection and development are compatible involvements.

We can rest assured that the inconsistent biased and weak regulation by the C-NLOPB will continue on the Grand Bank. Seismic exploration with unknown biological consequences will continue. Corporate self-reporting and confidentiality about spills during exploration will continue. Corporate bias will continue to permit oil exploration companies access to marine protected and sensitive areas from which fisheries are excluded.

As the government is making \$320,000,000 cooperate well fare contribution, we need to refocus our objectives on environmental protection rather fast-tracking oil exploration. The Grand Bank is surely the most credible and long-term financial institution that we can rely on.

Birds in area

Leach's storm-petrels made their predictable landfall strandings during their peak fledgling period in October. High numbers of birds were rescued and released in Bay de Verde (Sherry Green) and in Red Head Cove (Darrell Rice).

Ring-necked ducks and greater scaup have been flocking to Murray's Pond in Portugal Cove with numbers up to 100 or more at times. Wendy Zebniak photographed a mourning dove with white flanks which looked very much like a white-winged dove. Assessments by Kyle d'Entremont and Robert Blackmore suggested that the bird was an aberrantly plumaged mourning dove.

Contacts = mont@mun.ca, 864-7673[w], 895-2901[h], 695-5305 [c]. Birds I View columns can be found on Twitter and Facebook and at https://www.mun.ca/psychology/montevicchi/public_outreach/birds_i_view/