

The Oslo / Paris Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment (OSPAR) - background brief

The OSPAR convention, designed to protect the seas of the north-east Atlantic, is holding a ministerial meeting in Bergen, Norway from 20-24 of September, with a Ministerial segment on the 23rd and 24th, where they will consider a call for a “moratorium on certain new oil exploration activities in deep waters” being promoted by Germany.

Members of the OSPAR, set up in 1992 by unifying and up-dating the 1972 Oslo and 1974 Paris Conventions “must take all possible steps to prevent and eliminate pollution”.

The member states of the OSPAR Commission, which meets annually, are Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and United Kingdom, along with the European Commission.

One of the areas of the Convention is offshore oil and gas drilling. The main drilling areas covered by OSPAR are the UK’s North Sea, the coast of Norway and the Barents Sea, the Faroe Islands, Shetland, Iceland and the east coast of Greenland.

There has been wrangling all week over a resolution proposed by Germany asking for checking if a moratorium on deep sea oil drilling might be necessary. The main governments opposed are the UK, Denmark (on behalf of Greenland and the Faroe Islands) and Norway.

The British ministerial delegation -- likely to be Minister for Energy Charles Hendry and, from the Department for Environment, either Caroline Spelman MP or Richard Benyon MP -- will further attempt to remove this resolution.

Earlier this month, Greenpeace lawyers threatened the UK government with legal action over deep sea drilling in British waters following the Deepwater Horizon disaster. The environmental group delivered a formal “letter before action” to the coalition government, which argues that if ministers grant licenses for new deep sea drilling without carrying out a new environmental assessment they would breach UK and European law.

The Cameron government concedes that the area to the West of Shetland, where further proposed deep sea drilling would take place, is a “particularly challenging location” and yet insists that “no depth constraints [for drilling] are envisaged.”

In 2003, OSPAR ministers agreed to identify the first set of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) in the North East Atlantic by 2006, in order to create a network of MPAs by

2010. The deadline is now here and next to nothing has been done by OSPAR member countries to fulfill their obligations and protect our oceans: only 1% of the OSPAR oceans area is protected as MPAs.

It is expected that OSPAR ministers meeting in Bergen this week will commit to protect several high seas areas in the North East Atlantic, and celebrate this as a major achievement. The agreement will be too little too late, and will above all have to be accompanied by measures to restrict fisheries in order to be fully protected areas. OSPAR as such cannot regulate fisheries and if fisheries are not permanently banned in these areas, they will sadly only be paper parks.

Science suggests that in order to be truly effective, a network of fully protected marine reserves, areas of ocean off-limits to fishing and other extractive activity should cover 40% of the world's oceans.

Another central issue on the OSPAR agenda this year is the upcoming issue of Ocean acidification. This CO₂ pollution issue represents yet another serious threat to marine ecosystems that are already struggling with the impacts of climate change, over-fishing and pollution. The threat will continue as long as CO₂ is emitted into the atmosphere and for long after we have stopped.

Reducing CO₂ emissions to the atmosphere is the only practical way to minimise the risk of large-scale and long-term changes to the oceans. Greenpeace assisted the largest in situ experiment ever conducted into the effects of ocean acidification on the marine environment on Svalbard this summer.

Read more about ocean acidification here:

<http://www.greenpeace.org/arctic>

and the experiments on Svalbard here: <http://epocaarctic2010.wordpress.com/>

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