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Explained | Drilling in the North Sea — history and environmental concerns

PREMIUM

The U.K. is planning on more drilling in the North Sea for oil and natural gas. Is this in line with the climate goals they seek to achieve?

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File photo of a section of the BP Eastern Trough Area Project oil platform in the North Sea, around 100 miles east of Aberdeen, Scotland. | Photo Credit: AFP

The story so far: U.K. Prime Minister Rishi Sunak recently backed plans for new fossil fuel drilling off Britain's coast, worrying environment experts even as the world continues its stride towards irreversible climate change.

According to an official statement released on July 31, the move will help Britain become more energy independent. The North Sea Transition Authority (NTSA), responsible for regulating oil, gas and carbon storage industries, is currently running its 33rd offshore oil and gas licensing round. NTSA expects the first of the new licences to be awarded in the autumn, with the round expected to award over 100 licences in total.

“Even when we've reached net zero in 2050, a quarter of our energy needs will come from oil and gas. But there are those who would rather that it come from hostile states than from the supplies we have here at home,” Mr. Sunak said.

A short history of drilling in the U.K. North Sea

Geographically, the North Sea lies between England and Scotland on its west, the Netherlands, Belgium, and France on its south, and Norway, Denmark, and Germany on its west.

The 1958 Geneva Convention on the Continental Shelf was the first international legislation to establish the rights of countries over the continental shelves adjacent to their coastlines and paved the way for exploration in the North Sea. The treaty came into force in 1964, shortly after the U.K. Parliament passed the Continental Shelf Act in April of the same year. The Act provides for exploration and exploitation of the continental shelf based on the 1958 convention. It delineated the jurisdiction the U.K. had over oil and gas resources (excluding coal) under the seabed near its shores.

The first licence for exploration in the U.K. North Sea was awarded to British Petroleum (BP) in September 1964. The following year, BP discovered natural gas in the North Sea, off the east Anglian coast. However, the excitement of the achievement was short lived as Sea Gem, the BP-operated drilling rig, collapsed in December 1965.

In 1970, BP made its first discovery of commercial oil in the large Forties Field east of Aberdeen, Scotland. Hamilton, an American oil company, was the first to bring North Sea oil to the shore in 1975.

In the next 15 years, BP started more than 15 fields in the U.K. North Sea (and four in the Norwegian North Sea). More British, European, and American companies continued their exploration of the North Sea, and by the 1980s, there were over a hundred installations looking for oil and gas. The race for extracting resources also came at a cost, exemplified by the 1988 disaster at the Piper Alpha oil platform where more than 165 people were killed. The disaster was investigated by Lord Cullen, whose recommendations led to a major revamp in offshore safety culture.

The Foinaven and Schiehallion fields were discovered in the 1990s, opening up the West of Shetland area for exploration and exploitation. Production from the North Sea peaked in 1999, when it produced 1,37,099 thousand tonnes total of crude oil and natural gas liquids. By 2022, the total production declined to 38,037 thousand tonnes, according to U.K. government figures.

Why is offshore drilling problematic?

According to the U.S.-based advocacy group Natural Resources Defence Council (NRDC), offshore drilling puts “workers, waters, and wildlife” at risk. Drilling in seas and oceans for fossil fuels not only aggravates the threat of climate change but also warms oceans and raises sea levels. Offshore drilling is associated with a direct risk to marine biodiversity, as well as with indirect risks to coral reefs, shellfish and the marine ecosystem from acidic waters because of carbon pollution settling into oceans.

Is the U.K. honouring its climate commitments?

In its March 2023 Progress Report to the U.K. Parliament, the Climate Change Committee (CCC) which advises the U.K. and devolved governments on emissions targets, said that the U.K. has not adequately prepared for climate change under the second National Adaptation Programme.

In the U.K., National Adaptation Programmes are statutory programmes that the government must follow to help prepare the country for climate change, as required under the Climate Change Act. The second National Adaptation Programme covered the period of 2018 – 2023.

As per CCC's report, there is "very limited evidence" of the implementation of adaptation at the scale needed to fully prepare for climate risk.

According to Climate Action Tracker, U.K.'s climate action is not consistent with the Paris Agreement. Although its overall rating is "almost sufficient", U.K.'s Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) and long-term targets do not represent a fair share of the global effort to address climate change. Licensing new oil and gas extraction plans is incompatible with the 1.5°C limit in the rise in temperature, per the Climate Action Tracker website.

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