

WHAT ARE THE CONCERNS ABOUT DRILLING IN THE NORTH SEA

The Hindu

Paper - I & II (Geography and International Relations)

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, expects the first of the new licences to be awarded in autumn, with the round expected to award over 100 licences in total.

What is the history of drilling there?

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 east.

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 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. In 1970, BP made its first discovery of commercial oil in the large Forties Field east of Aberdeen, Scotland. 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 U.S. companies continued their exploration of the North Sea, and by the 1980s, there were over a hundred installations looking for oil and gas.

The production from the North Sea peaked in 1999, when it produced 1,37,099 thousand tonnes of crude oil and natural gas liquids. By 2022, the total production declined to 38,037 thousand tonnes, according to official 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.

What about 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 from 2018-2023.

As per the 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 the 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, as per the Climate Action Tracker website.

Expected Question

Que. With which of the following countries does not share its border with the North Sea?

- (a) Ireland
- (b) Scotland
- (c) England
- (d) France



Answer : a

Mains Expected Question & Format

Que.: Discuss the economic-environmental importance of the continental shelf of the North Sea.

Answer Format :

- ❖ Briefly discuss the geographical location of the North Sea in the first part of the answer.
- ❖ In the second part discuss the economic-environmental importance of the continental shelf of the North Sea.
- ❖ Finally, give a conclusion showing the way forward.

Note: - The question of the main examination given for practice is designed keeping in mind the upcoming UPSC mains examination. Therefore, to get an answer to this question, you can take the help of this source as well as other sources related to this topic.