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Newfoundland fracking panel lacks diversity and key areas of expertise

BY LEAH FUSCO | MARCH 2, 2015

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In February, the "Public Forum on the Gulf of St. Lawrence, Oil and Fracking" drew a full house in western Newfoundland, where anti-fracking sentiment has been growing since 2012 when Shoal Point Energy first suggested it may use fracking

to unlock oil from shale rock.

The forum, sponsored by the Social Justice Cooperative of NL and the NL chapter of Save Our Seas and Shores, was organized partially in response to the lack of diversity in the recently announced panel, established by the N.L. government, which will study the socio-economic and environmental implications of fracking in the province, and to address the need to start looking at oil development issues in the area on a regional basis.

N.L. government fracking panel misses all marks

The government panel, announced in October 2014, was immediately criticized for its lack of diversity and narrow scope of expertise. Its **members**, all white men, bring significant knowledge only from the areas of engineering, economics and biochemistry.



Other areas of expertise, such as medicine and social science, key to studying socio-economic impacts, especially the impact of fracking on human health, are largely absent from the skills list on the panel.

Graham Oliver, of the Port au Port-Bay St. George Fracking Awareness Group, is concerned that the review panel will not adequately address the issues of most concern to communities and does not believe that it has the ability to make a valid recommendation on fracking.

"There is no one on the panel dedicated to evaluating the impact of hydraulic fracturing on human health and the environment, which are the two most important issues with hydraulic fracking," he states.

Furthermore, the panel's white male academic makeup leaves out the voices of women, Indigenous people and people living in the affected areas. "The panel doesn't represent the province or the people," says Paula Graham, Social Justice Co-op board member.

"The organizing committee did an excellent job putting together a forum that brought in those different voices and ideas that are not represented on the government panel," says Graham. She notes that the organizing committee put a lot of time and thought into who to include on their panel, something she does not feel the government did.

The panelists, Irene Novaczek, Michael Bradfield and Chief Mi'sel Joe, blended experience, academic knowledge and passion in an atypical event that began with a women's drumming circle and the Ode to Newfoundland, and ended with an impassioned speech by a 12 year

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The talks included discussion of the biological significance of the region and some of the potential socio-economic and environmental impacts of fracking as well as a call to Newfoundlanders to protect the province for future generations.

Bradfield, a retired economist and member of the N.S. fracking review panel, suggested that the benefits of fracking are often overestimated and that the number of local jobs provided, if fracking were to take place, would be minimal.

Local impacts, such as truck noise, light pollution or chemical spills could be significant in rural locations. The Gulf of St. Lawrence region, which includes five jurisdictions, is one of the **most productive** ecosystem in Canada and an important location for fishing and tourism. It is far too important and sensitive to risk, Novaceck argued.

Linking fracking in N.L. to regional development issues

While fracking was the immediate issue addressed by the forum, Graham explains that they had a second motive in mind when organizing the event: to link fracking in N.L. to the wider issue of oil development in the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

Both issues have raised concerns about impacts on Newfoundland's west coast. For instance, recent **research** suggests that if there were an oil spill at the Old Harry site, the coasts of both N.L. and N.S. would be the areas most impacted.

Similarly, industry interest in the shale rock surrounding Gros Morne National Park led to concerns that fracking could cost the park its UNESCO world heritage status.

Interest in developing oil in the Gulf of St. Lawrence has been ongoing for decades, but a proposal to conduct a seismic survey in the Old Harry oil field in 2010 sparked opposition in the region and the establishment of a five province coalition to fight the development.

Similarly, Shoal Point Energy's interest in using fracking on NL's west coast led to a growing movement against fracking that successfully pressured the government to implement a **temporary ban** while the issue was studied more closely.

Until now, these two issues, fracking and the development of the Gulf of St. Lawrence, have largely remained separate. Graham notes that the organizer's choice of panel members at the forum reflects their desire to connect fracking in NL to much bigger issues.

"These specific issues often become siloed," she says. "The Social Justice Co-op is trying to talk about them at multiple levels. It's not discussing fracking in the Port aux Port, and then talking about drilling in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, and then talking about the broader subject of climate change -- we need to be thinking and talking about all of these things at once."

She hopes that events like this will help broaden the discussion in the province to include issues of oil and climate change, something not likely to be a **priority** for the government review panel.

However, these kinds of discussions can be hard in N.L. because of the province's reliance on oil and its history of unemployment and complacency around oil development.

Graham stays hopeful, however, and is inspired by the forum's turnout as well as the work of groups like Divest Memorial University, which is fundamentally based on the link between oil development and climate change, and has been coming up with creative and **engaging** ways to share their message.

Leah is a PhD candidate at the University of Toronto. She studies oil, its socio-economic and cultural impacts, regulatory processes, and associated social movements.

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