

Too many gaps to recommend fracking in Newfoundland: panel

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There are too many science, technology and risk-assessment gaps to green-light fracking in western Newfoundland, says a panel that studied the contentious oil-extraction process. In a report released Tuesday, it recommends the province continue its freeze on fracking applications until major questions are answered.

“The science, the studies that have been done, have been somewhat limited – certainly limited compared to what we’d expect to have done in order to plan this kind of operation,” said Ray Gosine, an engineering professor at Memorial University of Newfoundland who led the government-appointed panel.

“There are a number of gaps and deficiencies that are significant,” he said in an interview. “These must be addressed before we feel that conditions could reasonably exist that would allow hydraulic-fracturing operations to proceed responsibly.”

The provincial government did not immediately respond Tuesday.

It’s believed Newfoundland’s west coast has deep shale formations that hold oil, unlike more shallow coal-bed gas deposits in parts of the United States and Western Canada. The province has not approved hydraulic fracturing – or fracking – for oil and gas by pumping water, nitrogen, sand and chemical additives at high pressure to split shale rock formations. It’s a process supporters say has been safely used for decades.

Critics blame fracking for groundwater contamination, air pollution and increased earthquakes.

Newfoundland and Labrador blocked any related applications in 2013, pending a review, after a proposal to frack for oil near Gros Morne National Park touched off intense public debate.

“There are concerns that industrial activity around Gros Morne National Park could threaten its designation as a UNESCO world heritage site or could negatively impact the enclave communities around the park that have developed a tourism industry based largely on Gros Morne,” the panel’s report says.

“An appropriate buffer zone around Gros Morne National Park must be established.”

Steps that should be taken before fracking is allowed should also include assessing potential health effects, greenhouse gas emissions and a modern seismic study of the Green Point Shale south of Gros Morne, says the report.

On Friday, Canada was once again urged in a draft decision by the UNESCO World Heritage Committee to act on its 2014 call for a buffer zone around the park’s famous cliffs, fjords and hiking trails.

Simon Jansen of the Newfoundland and Labrador Fracking Awareness Network said there are better, renewable energy options.

“It confirms all the uncertainties that we have been pointing out,” he said of the review panel.

“So many people have created a living around sustainable tourism. Even if fracking can be done in whatever shape or form, is this a good fit for the existing lifestyle with respect to fisheries and tourism?”

The report offers a graduated series of several other recommendations when and if the province lifts its current “pause” on fracking. They include studying how waste water would be handled, and the extent of existing rural fire and emergency services.

“Risks must be identified, assessed and effectively managed,” it says. “The public must have confidence that an industry will be managed and regulated in a manner that protects the health of people and the environment, and that advances the interests of the communities most affected by development.”