

UNESCO draft decision again urges industrial buffer around Gros Morne National Park

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Canada is once again urged to consider an industrial buffer zone for Gros Morne National Park in western Newfoundland, says a draft decision Friday by the UNESCO World Heritage Committee.

At stake is the park's world heritage status, granted in 1987 for its glacier-carved fjords, dramatic cliffs and geological features such as the Tablelands.

The committee recommended a buffer zone in 2014 after an oil drilling and hydraulic fracturing proposal near Gros Morne set off intense public debate.

"It's an incredibly special place, and it's a place that Canada has promised to protect on behalf of the world community," said Alison Woodley, national parks director for the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society.

"When a world heritage site is designated, it means we are responsible for it on behalf of the world and we have to do everything we can to protect it.

"Canada has not acted. They're saying there's no need for a buffer zone."

The committee will vote on the draft decision in July when it meets in Istanbul. If approved, Canada would be asked to report on conservation efforts by Dec. 1, 2017.

Parks Canada, in a response to the UNESCO World Heritage Centre dated last Nov. 30, said there are already laws and rules to safeguard Gros Morne.

"Officials concluded that the current suite of legislation and regulations provides a sufficient and effective framework to ensure the protection of the site over the long term," it says.

The province has not approved so-called fracking projects, and halted any applications while an independent panel — set to report Tuesday — reviewed potential impacts.

The World Heritage Committee's draft decision raises concern that Gros Morne "may no longer be adequately protected against oil and gas exploration if the (fracking) moratorium expires before other appropriate protection measures are in place."

If that happens, it reiterates a previous request that a monitoring team be invited to assess risks to the park's "outstanding universal value" — a key determinant of world heritage status.

The Parks Canada response said such an invitation would be "premature" before the Newfoundland and Labrador Hydraulic Fracturing Review Panel reports. It said federal and provincial officials would discuss those findings.

Requests for comment from federal and provincial ministers were not answered.

The Canada-Newfoundland and Labrador Offshore Petroleum Board confirmed there is no activity off the province's west coast at this time. There are five exploration licences in the region but none adjacent to Gros Morne, it said.

The park crowns the province's \$1 billion-a-year tourism trade. It draws thousands of visitors each year from around the world, its famed beauty the star of several advertising campaigns.

"There's really strong support for a buffer zone here in the local community," Woodley said from Gros Morne.

Thirty-two Canadian artists, writers and musicians including "The Book of Negroes" author Lawrence Hill and actor Greg Malone of "Codco" pushed last year for action. They signed an open letter asking

Ottawa and the province to establish a buffer around the park to keep oil development and other industrial activity at a distance.

Such protective zones are now standard practice around world heritage sites when they are nominated but that was not the case when Gros Morne was designated.

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