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Friday, October 30, 2020

BHP Exploration Drilling Project (BHP Canada)
Central Ridge Exploration Drilling Project (Equinor)
West Flemish Pass Exploration Drilling Project (Chevron)
Impact Assessment Agency of Canada
Newfoundland and Labrador Satellite Office
John Cabot Building, 10 Barter's Hill, Suite 301
St. John's, NL A1C 6M1

Re: Public Comments on BHP Canada, Central Ridge and West Flemish Pass Exploration Drilling Project draft Environmental Assessment Reports

To Whom It May Concern,

Please accept the Fish, Food and Allied Workers' Union (FFAW-Unifor) comments on the three exploration drilling project Environmental Assessment Reports that were released for public comment by IAAC during the same 30 day period – BHP, Central Ridge and West Flemish Pass. FFAW-Unifor represents approximately 15,000 working women and men throughout Newfoundland and Labrador, most of whom are employed in the fishing industry.

Overall, the content quality of these documents has been improving from a reviewer perspective. Incorporating information from previous and ongoing assessments as well as information related to comments received from previous and ongoing projects has greatly enhanced the overall analysis.

Requirements for Communications Plan with fisheries stakeholders have become more detailed which is appreciated by the fishing industry. The proposed requirement to provide a two-month notice of project start-up (previously two-week notice) along with details of safety zones, vessel traffic information, notification procedures in case of oil spills, potential health risks, monitoring programs, and follow-up programs will help mitigate some of the unease felt by harvesters as exploratory drilling ramps up in the offshore. **One further recommendation would be a two-week notification of the end point of a**

drilling project by a proponent. This is particularly important in the event that the drilling rig must transit through fishing grounds if a fishing season remains open or if an ongoing science or research survey is in progress. More consideration needs to be given to other ocean users by proponents as they conduct exploratory drilling projects offshore.

The requirement for monitoring and follow-up program information to be shared with the fishing industry and/or public is also welcomed as it allows for more transparency of the environmental assessment process. Further, it serves to document the effectiveness of mitigation measures and verify predictions made by the proponent related to project effects in frontier areas where many information gaps exist.

While FFAW-Unifor members recognize that each proposed exploratory drilling project will be of short-term duration, in site-specific locations we **do not** concur with the Agency that cumulative effects of multiple exploratory drilling projects over an expanse of time (e.g., a decade) will be minor. Increased supply vessel traffic, in particular, will have an impact on how our fishery is prosecuted which could have socio-economic impacts for harvesters season after season, year after year.

Land ownership and associated oil and gas activities ultimately result in a **displacement effect** for fish harvesters. The loss of fishing grounds to safety zones, drilling and production activities, abandoned wells and cable linkages, for example, all prevent economic opportunity to fish in areas that the oil industry has acquired offshore. Harvesters must therefore fish elsewhere. In some cases this entails spending more time and fuel to fish in more remote areas where catch levels may be lower. In other situations it may force harvesters to encroach on the fishing grounds of other harvesters, thereby reducing catch rates for everybody and/or creating gear conflicts.

Just as oil is not found evenly distributed below the ocean floor, fish habitat, and therefore fishing grounds, is location specific. It is therefore important to understand the spatial pattern of habitat and productivity when considering the impacts of displacing the fishing industry from highly productive fishing grounds.

Compensating for **damages** to commercial fishing gear is appropriate if the harvester is able to identify the supply vessel or rig that may have caused damage to *untended* gear along the transit route of an exploratory drilling project. As previously mentioned in other project comments to date, apprehension may be felt by a harvester to leave untended gear along the transit route of a project. Moving gear to an alternate location represents a potential economic loss that this process is unable to mitigate.

Oil spills are a major threat to the fishing industry. The health of the ocean is vital to the sustainability and profitability of the fishing industry. FFAW-Unifor is aware that there are considerable protocols and practices in place and many regulatory agencies involved in monitoring petroleum companies and marine vessels to ensure they meet minimal requirements. We also respect that oil companies have protocols and apply best practices to prevent spills from occurring. However, as we have seen over the past couple of years in the Newfoundland offshore, spills do happen.

The inclusion of notification procedures in the event of an oil spill into the Fisheries Communication Plan is valuable as well as outlining monitoring activities and notification of potential health risks related to a spill. This should add further transparency to the operational side of these projects, in the event of a spill.

FFAW-Unifor members would like to reiterate their objection to the use of dispersants in the event of an oil spill. It was noted in the documents that “chemically dispersed oil may have more pronounced effects on the early life stages of fish and invertebrates than on adult life stages” (page 59, BHP; page 52, Central Ridge; page 57 West Flemish Pass). More research is critical to understanding the long-term effects of dispersants on all aspects of the marine ecosystem.

Given FFAW-Unifor’s objection to oil exploration in the Northeast Slope Marine Refuge, an area closed to bottom fishing for conservation reasons, FFAW-Unifor members would like to see **more transparency** related to details that would enable an exploratory drilling program to proceed in this area. Specifically members would be interested in the measures that would be required to limit any adverse effects on conservation objectives as well as follow-up information related to the effectiveness of these measures.

In all three documents, a bold statement requires further qualification. On page 14/15 it states that, “the Department (DFO) advised that monitoring of finfish for the past 25 to 30 years in the Newfoundland and Labrador offshore has revealed no effects on fish health from ongoing oil and gas operations.” There is no discussion about the **type** of research or monitoring that has occurred to make such a statement or the **extent** of the research and/or monitoring. The paragraph was previously discussing Atlantic salmon, which all of the drilling projects have noted requires further research regarding migration routes.

Environmental effects monitoring programs have been conducted in the immediate vicinity of the four producing oil fields on the Grand Banks by the proponents themselves. The areas being proposed in these three exploratory drilling projects however are vastly different and have knowledge/information gaps. Therefore, it is

challenging to make inferences in these new frontier areas, if that is indeed why the statement noted above is included in the document.

*FFAW-Unifor members contend that effects from oil and gas activities in the Newfoundland and Labrador region have been a subject of ongoing concern with **very** limited analysis.*

We look forward to meaningful engagement with the proponents of these projects on the development of the Fisheries Communication Plans and their various components, including upfront **wellhead suspension or abandonment** preliminary discussions. It is important that proponents have a good understanding of the potential impacts of their project on other ocean users. The enhanced requirements being proposed by the Agency for the Fisheries Communications Plans, along with suggestions included in this letter, will benefit this overall process.

If you have any questions or comments, please feel free to contact the undersigned.

Kind regards,

Robyn Lee
Petroleum Industry Liaison
