

Nova Scotia government plans to strengthen protections for Georges Bank

By: The Canadian Press

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HALIFAX - The Nova Scotia government wants to increase environmental protections for Georges Bank by extending a moratorium on offshore drilling.

Premier Darrell Dexter said Thursday that he intends to introduce legislation this fall that would further protect the rich fishing grounds about 100 kilometres off the coast.

"We're considering in fact looking at a substantial increase in the protections for Georges Bank," he said.

"We have a resource ... which has provided a livelihood for centuries and we want to make sure that is adequately protected."

Dexter wouldn't say what those protections might include, other than an indefinite moratorium on what is considered one of the most productive and ecologically sensitive marine areas off the East Coast.

The Canadian and provincial governments agreed in May to extend a moratorium on oil and gas exploration on Georges Bank.

The drilling ban, in place since 1988, was set to expire in 2012, but it was extended for another three years to Dec. 31, 2015, to allow for more study.

Dexter said he didn't announce further protections at the time because his government wanted to gather more information on the ecosystem.

"We want to bring in a piece of legislation that will bring some certainty to the issue," he said Thursday.

He said he's watching what legislators in the United States do to manage the bank, the bulk of which is in American waters.

Earlier this year, President Barack Obama announced that a drilling ban on the American side of Georges Bank, which stretches across the border between Nova Scotia and Maine, would be extended to 2017.

Georges Bank is perhaps best known for its abundance of haddock, halibut and scallops. But the vast, shallow stretch of the sea floor is also home to endangered species of whales and turtles that migrate through its nutrient-rich waters.

The petroleum industry believes Georges Bank could also contain a vast store of natural gas.