

CROATIA: OIL DRILLING LIKELY TO HARM TOURISM



Many tourists have been flocking to Croatia due to its beautiful white sand and pebble beaches, friendly hosts, fresh seafood and mellow wine. However, with the announcement that Croatia will allow the drilling of oil in the Adriatic Sea, there are fears that this Mediterranean tourist haven may soon lose its appeal or even be destroyed.

In spite of the surging opposition to the pumping of crude oil in the waters of one of Europe's fastest growing summer-travel destinations, **the government of Croatia is determined to bolster the country's poor finances by giving exploration licenses to some of the foreign energy companies.**

The decision has created a deep split in Croatia, the newest member state of European Union that has a population of around 4.3 million. Opponents have warned that apart from damaging the country's breathtaking scenery, offshore drilling represents a significant environmental hazard, since it increases the risk of oil spills that may wreck tourism, the country's main source of income.

Supporters say that pumping crude oil could bring billions of dollars to the troubled economy of Croatia that has been in recession for several years. They add that the drilling of oil could eventually help Europe minimize its dependence on energy imports that come from Russia.

The Croatian Economy Minister Ivan Vrdoljak, said that this is an existential matter that will in the future bring a better life to the citizens of Croatia.

The most recent opinion poll indicates that 45% of Croatians oppose Adriatic oil drilling, while 40% support it with those in favor of the drilling living mostly in the inland areas and far from the coastal areas.

Croatia's government believes that the country's strategic position between Europe's west and east could turn it into a regional energy-powerhouse, like Norway in the North Sea. Vrdoljak said that Adriatic oil drilling will enable Croatia to become an energy exporter and this will bring security of energy supplies to Europe. **He also said that the environmental risks would be quite minimal due to the fact that they would apply the latest European Union safety standards, and nearly all of the new offshore platforms wouldn't be visible from Croatia's main coast.**

The initial exploration that will determine the profitability and quantities of oil production in the Adriatic is set to begin in June this year and last for 5 years before the commercial pumping of crude oil finally begins.

There's little doubt that the area has gas and oil reserves. In neighboring Italy, there are dozens of offshore platforms that are currently operating and some of them siphon crude oil. There are also eighteen rigs on the Croatian-side of the Adriatic which extract only gas that is considered to be a much lesser environmental risk than oil.

Croatia's Greens are not impressed by the government's safety pledges and they've began a petition campaign that is entitled "Say NO to oil in the Adriatic, say YES to sustainable growth". Mirela Holy,

leader of ORaH, a small Green party that began the campaign, said that the environmental risks are very high, and alternatives are renewable energies, particularly in the Adriatic, such as small hydro power stations, solar energy and windmills.

Opponents also say that Croatia's tourist revenue of approximately 7.5 billion euros (\$8.4 billion) per year are greater than the potential financial benefits of oil exploration, which are estimated by Croatia's government to be around 160 million euros (\$180 million) per year in exploration licenses given to the oil companies.

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