

Oil

Court challenge to Arctic oil drilling in Norway defeated

Environmental groups citing Paris accords and right to healthy life consider appeal



Oil companies seeking new areas for exploration have come under criticism © Reuters
Richard Milne, Nordic Correspondent

4 January 2018

Norway has defeated a lawsuit brought by environmental groups trying to block drilling for oil in the Arctic on the grounds the exploration was unconstitutional.

The action by Greenpeace Norway and Nature and Youth was dismissed on Thursday by Oslo's district court and the two groups were ordered to pay the state Nkr580,000 (\$71,000).

The [lawsuit is one of a growing number](#) brought by groups seeking to use constitutional and international agreements such as the 2015 Paris summit on climate change to force governments to take more action to reduce greenhouse gases.

Norway's decision to open new areas well within the Arctic Circle in the Barents Sea to oil exploration went against the constitutional right to enjoy a healthy environment, the groups argued.

The award of the licences in 2016 to companies such as Statoil, Chevron, ConocoPhillips and Lundin Petroleum went against Norway's commitment in Paris to limit temperature increases to 1.5C, they argued.

The district court found that the government had neither breached the constitution nor made any administrative error when it launched the so-called 23rd licensing round, which included the first new acreage for oil exploration in Norway in two decades.

Submissions from the environmental groups about the Paris agreement and possible unprofitability of the Arctic fields were “better assessed through political processes”, the court held.

The new area was part of a previously disputed region on the border with Russia thought to hold billions of barrels of oil.

Exploration in that area of the Norwegian Arctic has so far proved disappointing, with Statoil [drawing a blank](#) in a drilling campaign last year.

Last month, 11 oil companies [applied for new exploration licences](#) for a record number of blocks. The previous licensing round in 2015 drew 26 applications.

All this comes against a backdrop of rising public [opposition](#) to oil drilling. For the first time, an opinion poll last year showed a plurality of Norwegians favouring leaving some oil in the ground.

Oil exploration is likely to play a significant role in talks that started this week to form a government in Norway.

The two-party centre-right minority government is in talks with the Liberal party to form a broader coalition. The Liberals oppose new oil exploration, particularly the opening up of the [picturesque Lofoten Islands](#) inside the Arctic Circle, which the oil industry is pushing for.

Lawyers for Norway’s government had argued the lawsuit was little more than a publicity stunt. But Ingrid Skjoldvaer, head of Nature and Youth, said: “For us, it is crystal clear that the government violates the constitution . . . Norway’s oil policy is failing my generation and threatening my future.”

The groups said they were considering an appeal. Truls Gulowsen, head of Greenpeace Norway, said: “The case has contributed to raising awareness and given the environmental clause [of the constitution] real weight.”

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