

Low risk for Newfoundland oil disaster: Williams

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Premier Danny Williams said Newfoundland and Labrador will 'adopt the best practices in the world' to prevent a massive spill like the one that occurred off the coast of Louisiana. (CBC)

Newfoundland and Labrador Premier Danny Williams said the province's offshore oil industry will use the best available measures to prevent an oil spill like the one unfurling in the Gulf of Mexico and that the chances of such a disaster happening in the region are small.

"The people of the province can be assured that we will adopt the best practices in the world," Williams told the house of assembly Monday.

He had been asked to reveal what the province is doing to prevent and contain a potential spill on the Grand Banks akin to the one that occurred off the coast of Louisiana on April 20.

The Gulf spill was caused when an offshore oil drilling rig similar to those working off the coast of Newfoundland exploded and sank about 80 kilometres off the coast of Louisiana. The sinking of the rig broke a pipe leading from the well head, about 1,500 metres below the water's surface. The well began leaking oil and continues to spew about 800,000 litres of oil a day into the Gulf.

Three oil fields are now in production in the Grand Banks area, and oil companies are exploring deep-sea floors for more oil.

Williams said the oil fields off the coast of Newfoundland have the advantage of being farther from the shore and deeper in the ocean than the ones in the Gulf.

"As recently as this morning, we've looked at just exactly what the situations are in the North Atlantic," Williams said.

"It is a general understanding that because the offshore sites are significantly offshore and well east of the province that ... there's a lower likelihood that oil would actually come ashore in Newfoundland and Labrador."

Williams gave the example of several sites in the Grand Banks, including ones where commercial finds of oil have not yet been found.

The three operating fields — Hibernia, Terra Nova and White Rose — are all more than 300 kilometres southeast of St. John's.

Williams said although he has been advised that the possible impact on the fishery would be small, he did not want people to think he was downplaying risk.

"I'm not trying to minimize the circumstances under any situation, and we will make sure we monitor this very closely and adopt the best practices in the world," he said.

"I do have some concern, as I watch the process as it unfolds in the Gulf of Mexico, to wonder whether the technology is able to keep up with the problem."

Liberal Leader Yvonne Jones remained skeptical, given recent comments from scientists and environmentalists about the state of readiness for a disaster offshore.

"If people specializing in environmental protection do not have a level of confidence in our current system, how can the people of the province be assured that we will not be facing any similar disasters in the future?" Jones told the house.

Meanwhile, Bill Montevecchi, a professor at Memorial University who studies seabirds, said government could already be doing much more to safeguard the environment.

"It's certainly a wake-up call, and it's more than the industry, it's the government," said Montevecchi, adding that different levels of government and their agencies play roles in regulating and monitoring the industry.

"They're the ones who really have to step up to the plate. You know, it's nice to have the industry making efforts but it's the government that's supposed to be protecting our environment in the first instance, and they can be doing an awful lot better than they are."