

New fracking touted as Quebec eyes energy boom

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Port-Menier, the only village on Anticosti Island is pictured on August 12, 2013. Quebec's largest energy firm, Petrolia, is eyeing an estimated 40 billion barrels of oil beneath the surface of Anticosti Island, an ecological gem at the mouth of the Saint Lawrence.

Fresh moose tracks dot the ground where plans are afoot to dig for oil.

Quebec's largest energy firm, Petrolia, is eyeing an estimated 40 billion barrels of oil beneath the surface of Anticosti Island, an ecological gem

at the mouth of the Saint Lawrence.

But it has caused a rift among the island's few inhabitants and sparked a broader debate about the [economic benefits](#) and environmental risks of oil and gas development.

The company wants to try a novel fracking technology, injecting natural gas instead of water into the ground in easternmost Canada to push [crude oil](#) to the surface.

Petrolia chief executive Andre Proulx explained that injecting water into the rock on the island would just gum up the oil.

"It would actually prevent the oil from getting out," he told AFP.

Natural gas used in the operation, meanwhile, would be recovered and reused, he said, doing away with the need to decontaminate the water that would have been used in fracking.

The company aims to test the technology in 2014 and if it proves sound, start production two years later.

A handful of other Canadian firms are trying it too.

Quebec's Environment Minister Yves-Francois Blanchet said the technology meet strict environmental standards before it could be authorized.

Economist Pierre-Olivier Pineau is skeptical, citing the "high risk of the gas escaping" and thus fuelling [climate change](#).

The technology is being touted as an alternative to using water in fracking where locals fear contamination of [ground water](#).

As the industry ramps up fracking to access unconventional oil and gas, so has opposition.

In the coming months, Quebec is expected to start producing crude for the first time, following in the footsteps of five other Canadian provinces.

Forty percent of its energy currently comes from hydro-electric dams in the north, which is sufficient for the needs of its population, with excess supplies sold to the United States.



Denis Duteau, former mayor of Anticosti, inspects a well on August 13, 2013 on Anticosti Island, Canada, where oil exploration operations were conducted in

2010. Duteau was hired as a lobbyist by Petrolia, a Quebec oil company that plans to start pumping shale oil.

Quebec Environment Minister Yves-Francois Blanchet said the province is looking at oil and gas production to further bolster its "energy independence."

Petrolia, whose principle shareholder is the Quebec government with a 10.4 percent stake, holds the rights to 71 percent of hydrocarbon reserves in the province.

The company hopes this autumn to unleash the first geyser from an oil well on the Gaspé Peninsula, marking the beginning of what some predict will be an energy boom in the province.

Petrolia has estimated that the so-called Haldimand project near the town of Gaspé holds 7.7 million barrels of oil.

The rights are jointly held by the Bouygues family, one of the richest in France, through its Canadian investment arm Investcan Energy.

Investcan Energy has invested Can\$15 million in the project.

In order for it to proceed, however, the province must ease its strict water protection laws, which brings with it political risks.

Quebecers are keen to reap the wealth that comes from energy resources but do not want to sacrifice clean air and water to do it.

Developing the province's energy resources has the tentative support of Quebec's separatist Parti Quebecois government, despite objections

from some of its supporters.

"We're cautiously open to it," said Blanchet.

Once the tiny Haldimand project gets underway, Petrolia hopes to develop a second gas field in the Gaspé region believed to hold another 28 billion cubic meters of natural gas.

On Anticosti, fracking is at least three years away but detractors say it has already been destructive to the handful of inhabitants.

Marc Lafrance, smoking a cigarette outside his hunting cabin among the conifers, watching a beaver swim across a nearby lake, opposes oil development.



Marc Lafrance, an employee of a hunting camp who has been fighting the oil companies, is pictured on August 13, 2013 on Anticosti Island, Canada. Every Fall as many as 4,000 hunters come to the island in the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

"If the phreatic layers are contaminated the wildlife will no longer have access to clean drinking water. They have a right to a good quality of life too," he says.

Lafrance has fought the energy industry for the past three years, writing to the government, going to court and waging an online public relations campaign.

Anticosti, he says, "already has an industry: fishing and hunting" and its wild rivers and majestic cliffs, 400 moose and 200,000 deer are best left alone.

He and others accuse the former mayor of the island's only town of Port-Menier—population 216—of having schemed with Petrolia to get the project approved, after suddenly quitting politics to work as a lobbyist for the company.

Strains of the rift are visible on Lafrance's face: "It gets tiring after a while fighting with the people you live with."

Christopher came to camp with his wife and two children.

"It's so beautiful here," he said. "Why take the risk (of resources exploration and development). An accident would be disastrous."

Others point out that the island community has fallen on hard times and could use an injection after a local forestry company recently shuttered its doors.

Some fear letting slip away a last chance at economic recovery offered by Petrolia.

"It's essential for the survival of the village that it happens," said Martine Leboeuf, a bank staffer and mother, who was convinced by a trip organized by Petrolia to oil-rich Alberta to witness firsthand how resource royalties have transformed the province.

"I see a glimmer of hope for our lives to get better," echoed Denise Ouellet, another local woman who trekked to Alberta and back.

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