

Norway creates 'safety zone' at contested Arctic drill site

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Greenpeace International activists from eight countries scale and occupy Statoil contracted oil rig Transocean Spitsbergen on May 27, 2014 to protest the company's plans to drill the northernmost well in the Norwegian Arctic

Norway said Friday it had created a "safety zone" around the Arctic drilling site where Greenpeace is trying to prevent oil explorations.

The zone, which stretches for 500 metres (1,640 feet) around the site, has been created in order to force the departure of the Greenpeace ship

Esperanza, which is currently there.

The environmental group is trying to prevent Statoil from operating the northernmost well ever to be drilled in Norway.

"The vessels that are not involved in the oil activities of the operator do not have access to this area," petroleum and energy ministry spokesman Haakon Smith-Isaksen said.

But Greenpeace questioned the legality of the zone arguing that it should have been created with a 30-day notice period.

Greenpeace activist Truls Gulowsen told AFP that those on the ship "intend to stay" at least until June 28, the day a 30-day notice period would expire.

"We don't see any reason to move the Esperanza, which has the same right to be on this spot as an oil rig. We even got here first, which according to international law, allows us to stay," he said.

Greenpeace argues that the [drilling project](#) in the Hoop area of the Barents Sea is too close to the sea ice and to Bear Island 175 kilometres (109 miles) away, which is home to rare birds and, sometimes, polar bears.

A group of 15 Greenpeace activists boarded the Statoil rig earlier this week and tried to stop the [drilling](#).

The last seven who remained on the ship were removed by Norwegian police on Thursday.

Also on Friday, the Norwegian ministry of climate and environment rejected a Greenpeace appeal asking the government to protect Bear

Island and ban drilling in the area.

"We are ready to start the [drilling operations](#) as soon as everything will be in place," Statoil spokesman Morten Eek said.

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