

Spain's Canary islanders protest against oil drilling

November 30 2014, by Desiree Martin, Francois Lallemand



A woman holds a placard reading "Canaries, only one voice: No prospections" as she invites tourists to take part in the protest against oil exploration, in Corralejo, on November 30, 2014

About 200 people, including tourists, formed a giant "SOS" on a beach on Spain's Canary Islands on Sunday to protest against drilling for oil off the archipelago.

Activists staged the protest at the resort of Corralejo on the north coast

of Fuerteventura after bad weather forced them to cancel plans to send a flotilla to a site where Spanish oil giant Repsol began drilling for oil on November 18, about 50 kilometres (30 miles) off the island.

"We wanted to reach the prospecting zone and declare there our deep rejection to oil prospecting in the Canaries," said Ezequiel Navio, who heads a group combining environmentalists, local officials and [business people](#).

The flotilla will leave for the oil prospecting site as soon as the weather permits, he added.

Dozens of sailboats of all sizes, as well as fishing boats, kayaks and inflatable dinghies have signed up to take part in the protest.

"The Canaries has four natural parks, 45 percent of its territory has some level of environmental protection, it is an image that has taken three decades to build, now it seems like none of this matters," said Navio.

Spain's Industry Ministry in August authorised Repsol to search for oil in the region at three locations at depths ranging from three to seven kilometres.

Environmental groups including Greenpeace and the World Wildlife Fund, and the local government have campaigned against drilling for oil, saying a spill in the area would harm protected species, coral reefs, tourism and fisheries.

The Canary Islands have plentiful sun and wind and many locals say they would prefer to see investment in renewable energy, rather than in hydrocarbons, as has happened in El Hierro, the smallest of the seven islands that make up the archipelago.



People form a giant S.O.S. on a beach as they protest against oil exploration being carried off the coast of the Canary Islands, in Corralejos on November 30, 2014

It claims to be the first island in the world to obtain 100 percent of its electricity supply from renewable sources of energy thanks to a large wind farm.

Three-quarters of Canary islanders oppose the oil prospecting, according to a poll published last week carried out for the regional government.

'They don't respect us'

The regional government called a referendum to ask residents if the archipelago should change its environmental and tourism policies for the sake of oil and gas exploration, but the national government blocked that

in the courts.

"They don't respect us, we have demonstrated before all institutions in the Canaries, town halls, universities, we don't want oil prospecting," said Claudia Morales, the mayor of La Oliva which is responsible for Corralejo.

"We feel there is no respect for the decisions of the people of the Canaries," she added.

Spain imports nearly 80 percent of its energy and the central government argues it can no longer afford the luxury of not tapping into its natural resources.

Three Spanish navy boats rammed vessels in which Greenpeace activists were approaching a Repsol ship on November 15, video distributed by Greenpeace showed.



People take part in a protest against oil exploration off the coast of the Canary

Islands, at a beach of Corralejo, on November 30, 2014

An Italian protester fell into the water and was injured, Greenpeace said. It said its activists were protesting peacefully.

Repsol estimates its chances of finding oil in the region at 17-19 percent and plans to invest 350 million euros (\$438 million) in exploration.

It has promised to take steps to protect the environment and says the project will create jobs in the islands, where unemployment is over 30 percent.

Under the terms of the licence, Repsol must provide a deposit of 20 million euros (\$25 million) "to cover its environmental responsibilities".

It must stop its explorations if an earthquake stronger than magnitude 4.5 strikes the region.

The Canary Islands are Spain's third most popular destination after the Catalonia region including Barcelona, and the Balearic Islands.

The archipelago received 10.6 million foreign visitors last year, 17.5 percent of the total number of visitors to Spain.

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