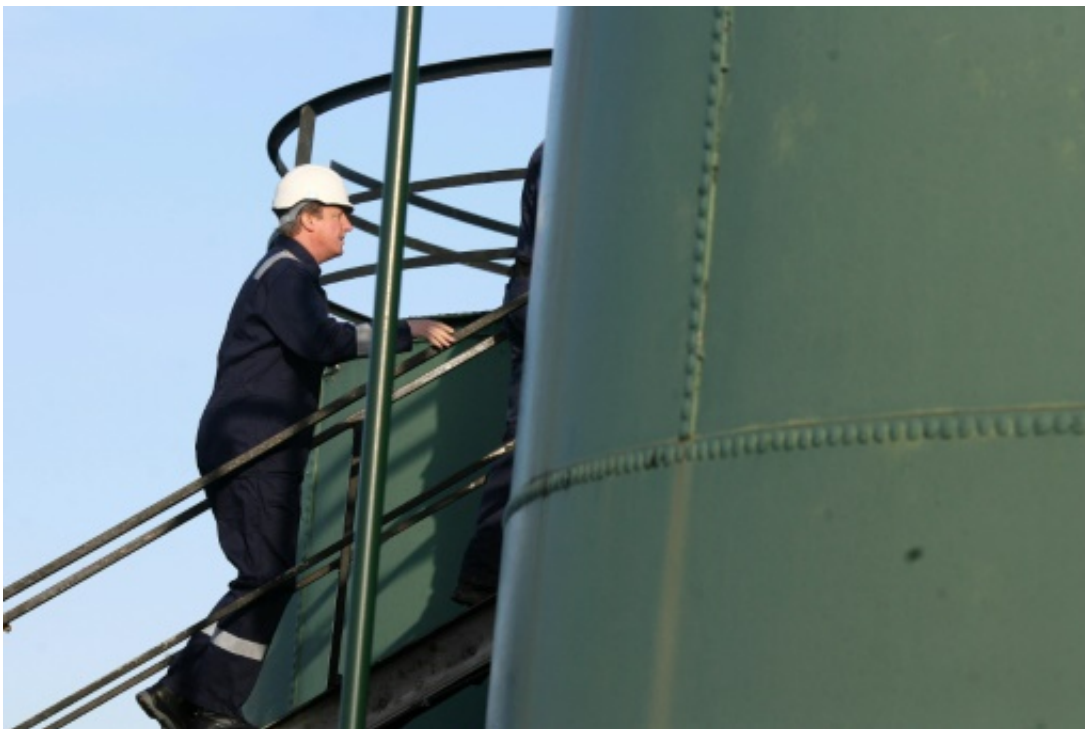


# Britain awards new shale exploration licences

December 17 2015, by Juliette Rabat

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British Prime Minister David Cameron participates in a guided tour of the IGas shale drilling plant oil depot near Gainsborough, Lincolnshire on January 13, 2014

Britain awarded scores of new licences for onshore shale exploration on Thursday in a move that opponents say could lead to controversial fracking beneath protected countryside.

Industry regulator the Oil & Gas Authority said in a statement that it has granted a total of 93 onshore licences covering 159 block areas across

England, most of the permits for exploration for shale oil or gas.

"This ... enables a significant amount of the UK's shale prospects to be taken forward to be explored and tested," said OGA chief executive Andy Samuel.

Energy companies that have won licences include Ineos, Cuadrilla Resources and GDF Suez.

Environmental group Greenpeace called the decision "bizarre and irresponsible".

The news comes one day after British lawmakers narrowly voted in favour of allowing fracking under national parks, despite earlier promises of a ban.

"Alongside conventional drilling sites, we need to get shale gas moving," said British energy minister Andrea Leadsom on Thursday.

"Now is the time to press ahead and get exploration under way so that we can determine how much shale gas there is and how much we can use."

Prime Minister David Cameron has previously pledged to go "all-out for shale", viewing it as a valuable energy source amid dwindling North Sea oil fields.

However, environmental campaigners and opposition politicians are against the opening up of the countryside to fracking for fossil fuels, and argue government's policy undermines its pledges to stop climate change.

Opponents fear that fracking—a way of extracting gas by blasting water, chemicals and sand underground—could pollute water supplies, scar the countryside, and trigger earthquakes.

## 'Outrageous'

Pressure group the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE) said Thursday the new licence blocks included land in three national parks and six "areas of outstanding natural beauty", opening the possibility for fracking underneath the protected areas.

"We have always opposed fracking in protected areas, so it is outrageous to see licences announced for fracking underneath three National Parks and five AONBs," said Emma Marrington, rural policy campaigner at the CPRE.

Greenpeace campaigner Hannah Martin added: "This announcement means that vast swathes of British [countryside](#) have been opened up to fracking".

The blocks relate to squares of land which the companies will have licence to explore for oil and gas.

They will then need to seek landowner consent, Environment Agency assessments and planning permission before drilling can begin.

The whole process could take several years before exploration, including fracking, takes place.

On Wednesday, British lawmakers had voted by 298 to 261 in favour of extending legislation to permit fracking 1,200 metres (4,000 feet) below national parks, areas of outstanding natural beauty and world heritage sites with drilling taking place from outside the protected areas.

The change would allow [shale gas](#) companies to drill sideways under [national parks](#).

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