

Canada stakes new claims

Extended continental shelf could mean expanded oil, gas rights

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Ottawa's late-breaking decision to lay claim to the North Pole stole the thunder from another part of the Canadian submission this week under the Law of the Sea.

Besides mapping the continental shelf jutting out from the Canadian Arctic coast, scientists also argued to add 1.2 million square kilometres to the Maritime seabed, including the Scotian Shelf south of Nova Scotia.

If recognized, the new undersea territory would expand Canada's rights to subsea minerals and oil and gas, as well as sea floor creatures.

Making such a claim is a slow process, and Canadians are not restricted right now from using that Scotian Shelf seabed.

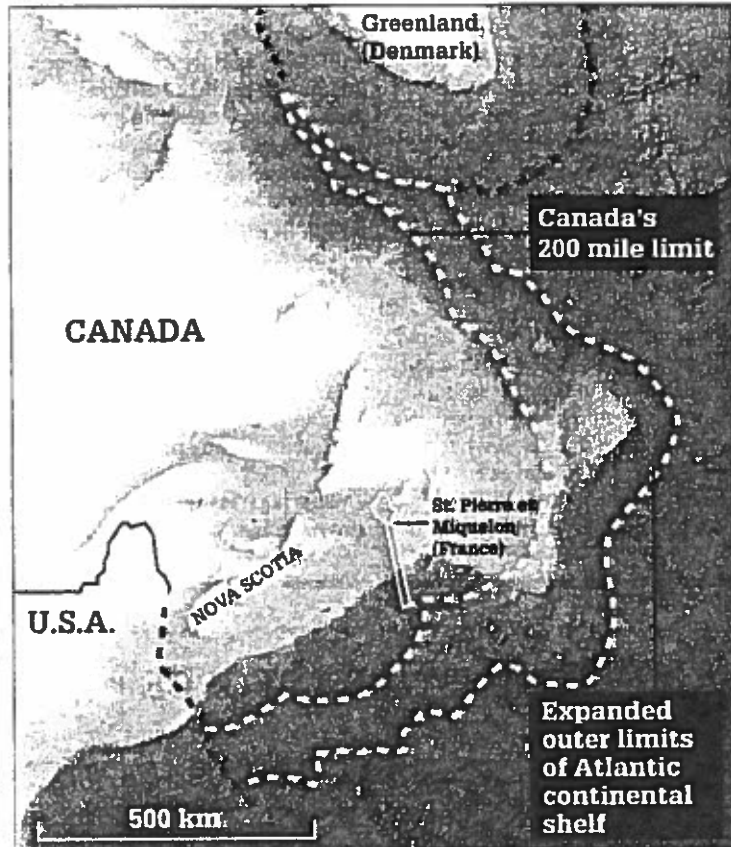
"Canada has a right to the extended continental shelf," said David VanderZwaag, a specialist in ocean law at Dalhousie University's Schulich School of Law. "You don't really have to claim it."

That's why parts of the sea floor south of Nova Scotia are already leased for gas exploration.

"It's when you get to the outer edge that it gets controversial," VanderZwaag said.

The far edge of the extended continental shelf from off western Nova Scotia to northern Labrador, as delineated in the Canadian submission, is 7,700 kilometres long.

Within that new zone, Canada could have rights to underwater



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minerals, oil and gas, VanderZwaag said.

"What also comes with it is, they call it sedentary species," he said. "Those species that move in constant contact with the sea floor."

They include things like Icelandic scallops, sea worms and "probably" lobster. Groundfish or any kind of swimming fish would not be covered by the claim; Canada would not have sovereign

rights to the fisheries.

The formal exploration of the limit, as well as the Arctic effort, has taken a decade. Though the 10-year time limit for making some kind of submission ended this week, Canada can add more information to its claim later.

The submission will go before the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf, which will issue a recommendation on whether to accept the scientific

documentation — a process that also takes years.

But it will be up to the Canadian government to negotiate any newly recognized zones that overlap with another country's claims.

Nova Scotia's maritime boundary with the United States, for example, would now extend farther offshore if the submission were accepted.

The authors of Canada's submission explained that the two countries have come to a temporary agreement over where Canada has drawn that line.

The United States "does not object to the consideration of Canada's submission" by the committee, though it does so "without prejudice" to Americans' future claims to its own extended shelf and to any future boundary talks, they wrote.

American scientists collaborated on the Scotian Shelf mapping, according to Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development Canada.

The underwater mapping was a multimillion-dollar effort by government scientists, with two leaders — Jacob Verhoef and David Mosher — based at the Bedford Institute of Oceanography in Dartmouth.

Verhoef was expected to speak about their work this week at the ArcticNet scientific conference in Halifax but he did not attend. Neither he nor Mosher was made available for comment.

"These individuals were not available to attend the conference as they had to attend to other priorities," Jacinthe Perras, a spokeswoman for National Resources Canada, said in an email.