

This paper not to be cited without prior reference to the author

International Council for the
Exploration of the Sea.

C.M. 1977/B : 27
Gear and Behaviour Committee
Ref. Fisheries Improvement
Committee

Some Belgian information on the interaction between
the offshore gas/oil industries and the fishing industry

by R. FONTEYNE
Fisheries Research Station
Ostend, Belgium

INTRODUCTION.

The recent development of the offshore oil and gas exploitations resulted in a serious interaction between the fishing industry and the gas/oil industries. Nationally as well as internationally, steps are taken to describe more precisely the different aspects of this interaction.

In view of the special session to be organised by the Gear and Behaviour and the Fisheries Improvement Committees on this interaction some information on the subject has been gathered with regard to the Belgian fishing industry.

In the first part the paper outlines the legislation as regards the gas/oil operations. The second part gives some comments of Belgian fishermen about these operations.

For the sake of completeness it must be mentioned that in Belgium no specific research on the interaction between offshore gas/oil operations and fishing activities, as requested in the ICES resolutions at the 64th Statuary Meeting, is planned.

1. Legislation.

1.1. In accordance with the Convention on the Continental Shelf (United Nations Conference on the Law of the Sea, Geneva 1958) the Law on the Continental Shelf of Belgium came into force in 1969. This law embodies the conditions for the exploration and exploitation of the natural resources on the continental shelf, i.e. mineral and other non living resources, as well as living organisms of the sedentary species.

In 1974 a Royal Decree was published concerning the granting of concessions for the exploration and exploitation of the mineral and other non-living resources on the continental shelf.

The measures re the protection of the navigation, the sea fishery, the environment and other essential interests came into force in 1977.

First of all the law requires a concession for the exploitation of mineral and other non-living resources of the sea-floor and the subsoil. The conditions to obtain a concession are stipulated by Royal Decree.

Concessions can only be granted for distinct areas. Up to now two areas have been retained, viz.

area 1, bordered as follows :

in the north-west by the line which joins the following geographic points :

51° 23' 30" N	2° 30' 00" E
51° 34' 36" N	2° 55' 56" E

in the north-east by the line which joins the following geographic points :

51° 34' 36" N	2° 55' 56" E
51° 31' 23" N	3° 04' 13" E

in the south by the line which joins the following geographic points :

51° 23' 30" N	2° 30' 00" E
---------------	--------------

51° 23' 00" N	2° 42' 40" E
51° 24' 00" N	2° 42' 40" E
51° 31' 23" N	3° 04' 13" E

area 2, bordered as follows :

in the north by the line which joins the following geografic points :

51° 20' 00" N	2° 25' 00" E
51° 21' 30" N	2° 31' 10" E
51° 21' 10" N	2° 42' 40" E

in the east by the line which joins the following geografic points :

51° 21' 10" N	2° 42' 40" E
51° 14' 35" N	2° 38' 25" E

in the south by the line which joins the following geografic points :

51° 14' 35" N	2° 38' 25" E
51° 12' 00" N	2° 29' 20" E

in the west by the line which joins the following geografic points :

51° 12' 00" N	2° 29' 20" E
51° 13' 26" N	2° 28' 53" E
51° 20' 00" N	2° 25' 00" E

The boundaries of these areas can only be changed on a joint agreement of the Ministries of Economic Affairs, Agriculture and Communications and on the ground of scientific investigations

Concessions are granted for a fixed period, with a maximum of 30 years, and after that the depth and the areas for the exploration and exploitation have been exactly defined.

For the parties concerned, provision is made to enter a protest against a demand for concession.

The decree stipulates the cases in which the concession can be withdrawn.

Secondly the offshore installations and other equipment necessary for the exploration and exploitation, as well as the eventual security areas, may not hinder in an unjustified way navigation, fishing activities or maintenance of the living resources of the sea.

For that purpose regulations can be imposed with regard to warning systems and as to the prevention of pollution of the seawater and damage to submarine cables and pipelines.

A security area is also imposed for any installation or device on the continental shelf. This area extends to a distance of 500 meters, measured from each point on the outer boundaries of the installation or device.

1.2. Up till now no concessions were granted for the exploitation of gas/oil or for the carrying out of test-drillings on the Belgian continental shelf. Obviously there is thus no practical application of the law.

The possibility to find oil and gas on the Belgian continental shelf is, according to the Geological Service of the Mining Department, indeed rather remote. Nevertheless a company applied for a concession for the seismic exploration of the subsoil.

2. Comments of fishermen.

2.1. To obtain some idea on hindrances caused by gas/oil operations. Belgian skippers were asked to answer a questionnaire.

Sixteen skippers answered the following questions :

- Do you meet with any hindrance from gas/oil pipelines ? Where (fishing grounds) ? When (period) ? For which fish species ?

- On which grounds and for which species fishing activities had to be stopped by the presence of drilling platforms and gas/oil pipelines ?

- Do you have any idea whether fishes concentrate in the vicinity of drilling platforms ? Is fishing performed round drilling platforms for this reason ?

- What damage to fishing gear has been caused by platforms and/or gas/oil pipelines ?

- Have you already been confronted with discharges or pollution arising from or caused by gas/oil installations ?

2.2. The grounds where Belgian fishing boats could meet hindrances from gas/oil installations are located in the southern North Sea.

These are : Smiths Knoll , Inner Bank , Well Bank , Leman Bank , Swarte Bank , Indefatigable Bank , Outer Dowsing , Sole Pit.

The comments can be summarised as follows :

a) Damage to fishing gear was reported in one case only : fouling of the gear resulting in the tearing of the net.

b) The loss of fishing grounds is regarded as the greatest nuisance. Especially on hard bottom fishing is very difficult as the pipelines cannot be dug in. Moreover, the direction of the pipelines is transverse to the direction of towing in most cases.

c) As to the density of the stock most of the skippers are under the impression that there is a concentration of fish around gas/oil

installations. This concerns flatfish species and cod which are especially fished during spring and summer. As reason for the higher concentration the herding effect, as occurring around wrecks, is given, as well as the lower fishing intensity.

d) A few skippers however think that the fish density around offshore installations is lower due to oil pollution.

e) Discharges from gas/oil installations did not seem to occur to the extent that the fishing activities were hindered. As to eventual pollution by drilling fluids and discharges of suspended solids no decisive answer was given.