

CLOSE WINDOW

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The secret Georges Bank review

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IF YOU DON'T know what's happening with the Georges Bank oil and gas review, join the crowd. Almost a year after Energy Minister Richard Hurlburt first beat a drum to support petroleum exploration in the rich fishing hole, all is silent.

But the silence can't quite hide a flurry of underground activity.

This fall, Nova Scotia's government quietly directed \$150,000 toward the South West Shore Development Authority to "examine economic opportunities from potential offshore oil and gas activities."

The agreement, struck with Hurlburt's department, also says the authority should "look at environmental and social risks" linked to drilling on the moratorium lands on Georges Bank and on adjacent offshore lands.

Why my charge of secrecy here?

First, Hurlburt's department didn't release the authority agreement until after I had asked for it. Secondly, no official news release has been issued to date to describe this use of taxpayers' money.

And lastly, the words Georges Bank are not mentioned once in the authority agreement, though it is clear that the primary focus of the work will be the debate surrounding possible oil and gas activity on the rich fishing hole.

I also learned that the authority has hired a researcher, Yarmouth Harbour Master Garth Atkinson, to put together some background on the Georges Bank story and the effects of the industry in other parts of the province. (The harbour master's job is a federal appointment.)

When I phoned Atkinson, he said he'd rather his name was not used in print, adding he is now trying to "catch up with the file." Atkinson, now making money sourced from two levels of government, said I should speak instead with Clifford Hood.

Hood, a fisheries lawyer and former Yarmouth deputy mayor, told me he is now the unpaid chairman of the Ocean First Task Force. Under the authority agreement, the task force will conduct community consultations in the Tri-County area of southern Nova Scotia. Overall, it will

look at the effects of possible oil and gas activity on Georges Bank if the Canadian moratorium expires in 2012.

Hood would be the first to concede that he now comes down on the Prorigs side of this debate, not the Norigs side led by the fishing industry. Cliff has made his money from a fisheries law practice, but it's clear to him that a little economic diversity wouldn't hurt down Yarmouth way.

Speaking of Yarmouth, Hood, Hurlburt and Atkinson are all like-minded gentlemen of that community. Nothing the matter with that, I suppose, but given the close ties between the minister and the lawyer, a little more transparency is in order here.

Hood was not appointed by the minister as chairman of the Ocean Firsts Task Force; the development authority gave him the position. But it would hardly be a stretch to suggest that Cliff would not have the job in the absence of Hurlburt's tacit approval.

Put that together with Hurlburt's early support for oil and gas exploration, and you've got yourself a political problem. Last February, Hurlburt referred in a Halifax breakfast speech to "the tremendous resources on Georges Bank," adding that the fish and oil industries could "coexist" offshore.

Before that speech, at his party's 2008 annual meeting, Hurlburt was more direct when he was asked about the moratorium: "It's safe to do drilling in our offshore," he said.

Given this history, it is clear Hurlburt's credibility rests on an impartial review of oil and gas activity on Georges Bank. The authority contract and cast of characters doesn't help establish his neutrality — quite the opposite, in fact. (I say that with some regret, for Hood is both a straight shooter and a friend; we have fought battles together.)

The danger here is that the politics of the authority's work will undermine the more important scientific review of Georges Bank that is just getting underway.

Lord knows, after 20 years of moratorium, Nova Scotia needs a dispassionate, evidence-based review of the potential and risks of oil and gas drilling in the Gulf of Maine. But who will believe the science is pure if the politics is already seen to be poisoned?

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