

Namibia to licence production near Okavango Delta if Canadian firm finds oil

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Namibia intends to award a 25-year production licence to Canada's ReconAfrica if it finds oil near the Okavango Delta, energy minister Tom Alweendo said, despite concerns it could affect the region's rich biodiversity.



Trees stand on islands as water begins to fill the Okavango Delta, Botswana. Reuters/Mike Hutchings

Alweendo's comments come amid opposition to the project in the Kavango Basin where drilling is taking place some 260km away from the pristine Okavango Delta, a Unesco World Heritage site shared by Botswana and Namibia, whose waters drain into the desert sands of the Kalahari.

In April, ReconAfrica said initial drilling had confirmed an active petroleum system on Namibia's side. However, Unesco's World Heritage Committee warned against granting of exploration licences in Botswana and Namibia.

"What is the point of me allowing somebody to drill and then turn around and say we are not going to give you a production licence?" Alweendo told Reuters on Tuesday on the sidelines of an African energy conference in Cape Town.

"Obviously, we intend to give the production licence if they found the oil," he said, adding that the firm needed to follow the requisite environmental laws.



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Commitment to protect local ecosystems

ReconAfrica did not immediately respond to questions sent on Tuesday and Wednesday. It has said previously it will adhere strictly to regulations, with no drilling in environmentally sensitive areas and a commitment to protect local ecosystems.

The Okavango Delta is one of the very few major river delta areas that does not flow into a sea. It is fed by the annual flooding of the Okavango river, making the wetland an important dispersal route for elephant and other wildlife.

While acknowledging the licensed territory was outside the area and its buffer zone, Unesco raised concern about any potential spills or pollution. The Kavango East and West Regional Conservancy and Community Forestry Association has also asked for more consultation with local communities.

ReconAfrica, a junior oil and gas explorer, holds licences for around 8.5 million contiguous acres to explore for oil and gas in the northeast of Namibia as well as neighbouring Botswana.

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