



“Accelerating actions for a resilient Blue Pacific”

7th, 8th, 9th September 2021, Virtual Platforms
12:00pm – 5:00pm Samoa Standard Time

Agenda Item 8.4.3: Deep Seabed Mining: A Pacific Environmental and Governance Challenge

Purpose of paper

1. To inform Members, of the Secretariat’s advice on proposed Deep Seabed Mining in the Pacific islands region; and
2. To seek endorsement of the Secretariat’s recommendation for Members to apply the precautionary approach to proposed Deep Seabed Mining activities.

Background

3. In recent years as demand for technologies such as smart phones, electronics and renewable energy systems increase so too has the demand for rare earth elements (REE). While there are deposits of REE on land, it has been known for over 50 years that there are vast deposits of REE found in the deep seabed, and with the advances in technology it is now driving investors and countries to consider the feasibility of deep seabed mining (DSM) companies in extracting REE from the deep-sea.
4. This interest in DSM includes several SPREP Pacific Member countries who have granted permits for DSM exploration within their territorial waters.
5. The Cook Islands government recently officially launched the licensing phase of seabed minerals exploration in its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). The Cook Islands, Kiribati, Tonga, and Nauru also act as sponsor states for exploration permits in the Clarion Clipperton Zone (CCZ) in the International Seabed Area in the eastern Pacific in accordance with UNCLOS regulations administered by the International Seabed Authority.
6. However, there are also other positions on DSM taken by governments in the region, ranging from the ban on mining within the EEZ to a call for a moratorium on DSM activities. Civil society organisations in several Pacific countries have expressed opposition to DSM before environmental and social impacts are fully assessed and understood.
7. The SPREP Secretariat has prepared a paper on DSM (refer WP.8.4.3/Att.1) to inform Members of the key known environmental issues and other challenges of DSM in the region. The predicted impacts of DSM activities, based on current scientific understanding are contrary to Sustainable Development Goal 14.

8. DSM is a complex composite of environmental, economic, policy, governance, international, regional and community issue.
9. Whilst DSM offers the prospect of increasing access to relatively scarce mineral resources that can be used to support development of sustainable energy solutions it however entails potentially high environmental costs and economic risk for countries in the region.
10. Fundamentally, there is a conflict between the commitments by Pacific island countries to protect and sustainably manage the ocean and the desire for industrial scale exploitation of deep-sea minerals.
11. The SPREP paper presents five likely major environmental impacts of DSM:
 - a. Direct destruction of seabed habitat and sessile organisms through the mining process and extraction
 - b. Changes to the geochemical and physical properties of the seabed
 - c. Sediment plumes and resuspension of mining silts
 - d. Contaminant release and changes to water properties; and
 - e. Increases in sound, vibration, and light.
12. The threats and uncertainties of deep seabed mining summarised in the paper reinforce the need for SPREP Members to apply the precautionary approach adopted by countries in the Rio Declaration in 1992.
13. It is the view of the SPREP Secretariat, that a 10-year moratorium on DSM proposed by some Pacific Member countries would enable:
 - a. A comprehensive assessment of environmental, social, and economic risks.
 - b. Assessments that DSM can be implemented with effective management of the marine environment and biodiversity protected.
 - c. Time to develop and strengthen a global circular economy that can ensure recycling of scarce mineral resources.

Recommendation

14. The Meeting is invited to:
 - 1) **note** the position paper prepared by the Secretariat on Deep Seabed Mining in maintaining the principles of the precautionary approach for PICTs;
 - 2) **support** a 10-year moratorium on Deep Seabed Mining as part of implementation of the precautionary approach; and
 - 3) **endorse** the Secretariat's recommendation for the Members to continue to apply the principles of the precautionary approach with regards to proposals for deep seabed mining activities.

18 June 2021