

National Seabed Minerals Management Board launched in Marshall Islands

Written by Administrator

Tuesday, 14 October 2014 08:50 - Last Updated Thursday, 19 March 2015 13:09



Monday 13 October 2014, Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC), Suva, Fiji - The Government of the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) formed an Interim National Seabed Minerals Management Board (INSMB) on 2 October 2014. The board members, consisting of a small team of government officers and non-governmental representatives, are tasked by Cabinet to develop national policy and law for the appropriate governance of the nation's deep sea resources. The Board will receive financial support and technical assistance from the Deep Sea Minerals (DSM) Project: a partnership between the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) and the European Union (EU).

Old tales of treasure at the bottom of the ocean did not sound so fanciful in Majuro two weeks ago, when INSMB held its inaugural meeting to discuss the precious metals known to exist in the nation's deep seabed.

INSMB Chairperson Rebecca Lorennij (Secretary for the Ministry of Resources and Development) thanked those at the meeting: 'The RMI government and its people would like to thank SPC and the EU through the SPC–EU DSM Project for the ongoing support provided during the past few years.'

The INSMB will now progress further with the national policy on deep seabed mining and the Seabed Management Bill before approval by the RMI government, a prerequisite to establish responsible governance and management of these resources.'

'I am delighted that the government of the Republic of the Marshall Islands, in partnership with the SPC–EU DSM Project, has established an Interim National Seabed Minerals Management Board. This is an important step for RMI. The right governance structure for deep sea mining needs to be in place before any exploration or extraction starts. Credible policies and actions that safeguard the socio-economic and environmental interests of its current and future generations must be formulated and adhered to. Meaningful participatory mechanisms whereby citizens, civil society, private sector and the media can have a role in the development and monitoring of deep sea mining policies will be critical. Respecting people's views is important on such a complex subject as deep sea mining,' said Mr Andrew Jacobs, Head of Delegation of the EU for the Pacific.

Deep seabed mining has not yet occurred anywhere in the world, but Nautilus Minerals Inc., a Canadian-listed company operating under licence in Papua New Guinea's waters, is likely to commence mining within the next few years. Other companies are exploring seabed sites across the Pacific, and China, Russia and Japan have interest in international waters just outside of Marshall Islands' maritime jurisdiction.

One reason for this commercial interest in the deep seabed is the pursuit of alternative sources of 'rare earth elements', essential components for high-tech applications, and green technology – such as wind turbines and solar panels – that are not readily available on land.

Past studies in Marshall Islands' waters reveal the presence of 'cobalt-rich crusts': rocky deposits that gradually built up over millions of years on the flanks of subsea mountains. These crusts are thought to contain in-demand metals such as cobalt, nickel, copper and platinum – and rare earth elements. The methods to extract the crusts from the seafloor have not yet been developed.

Underwater mining at thousand-metre depths is not only a technological challenge, but also raises general environment concerns. Deep-sea environments are some of the least explored territory on the planet. States have made international commitments to protect and preserve the ocean, and conserve its biodiversity. Accordingly, any deep-sea mining activity will need to balance the interest in economic gains with environmental sustainability.

SPC–EU DSM Project Legal Advisors Hannah Lily and Marie Bourrel, present at the meeting, congratulated the Board Chairperson Rebecca Lorennij and other board members for their thoughtful discussions. The SPC–EU DSM Project worked with the Marshall Islands Attorney General's Office to prepare the draft policy and law that will form the basis of the board's discussions. The project will also provide support to the board to hold public information-sharing and consultation events over the coming months, to inform the Marshallese people about the issues and to hear their views about whether and how Marshall Islands should engage with the emerging deep-sea industry.

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Photo Caption: Inaugural meeting of the Interim National Seabed Minerals Management Board in Majuro, on 2 October 2014 comprising: Lowell Alik (Environmental Protection Agency), Jonathan Kawakami (Attorney General's Office), Bruce Bilimon (Assistant Secretary of Finance, Revenue and Tax), Hannah Lily (DSM Project –Legal Advisor – SPC), Marie Bourrel (DSM Project – Legal Advisor – SPC), Rebecca Lorennij (Ministry of Resources and Development, INSMB Chairperson), and Henry Sanday (Office of Commerce and Investment).

For more information, contact SPC–EU Deep Sea Minerals Project Legal Advisor Marie Bourrel (Tel: +679 338 1377; email: marieb@spc.int) or visit the SPC–EU Deep Sea Minerals Project webpages: www.GSD.org/dsm