



**SCIENTIFIC COMMITTEE
TWENTIETH REGULAR SESSION**

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Deep Seabed Mining Activities in the WCPFC Convention Area

**WCPFC-SC20-2024/EB-WP-14
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Submitted by the Secretariat

Purpose

1. The purpose of this paper is to provide information on the activities of the International Seabed Authority (ISA) in the Pacific Ocean in areas that overlap with the WCPFC Convention Area. No commercial seabed mining activities are currently taking place in the WCPFC Convention Area (or anywhere in the world); however, deep seabed exploration (not extraction) is taking place in the Convention Area's waters, including in an area of the high seas known as the Clarion Clipperton Zone (CCZ) in the Northeast Pacific Ocean, under a Regional Environmental Management Plan (REMP).¹ In addition, discussions by the ISA toward the commencement of deep seabed exploration in the Northwest Pacific Ocean are currently underway.²
2. The Secretariat provides this paper in line with Article 15, paragraph 4(b):

The Secretariat functions shall include: facilitating the compilation and dissemination of data necessary to accomplish the objective of this Convention;

and Article 5 of the Convention, which sets out the principles and measures for conservation and management of highly migratory fish stocks in the Convention Area, includes in paragraph (d):

[to] assess the impacts of fishing, other human activities and environmental factors on target stocks, non-target species, and species belonging to the same ecosystem or dependent upon or associated with the target stocks.

Introduction

3. The International Seabed Authority (ISA) is an organization established under the United Nations

¹ Information on the CCZ REMP can be found [here](#). The map and coordinates of the CCZ ISA Environmental Management Area can be found [here](#).

² A report from a recent workshop in February 2024 to develop a REMP for the Northwest Pacific can be found [here](#).

Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) to regulate mineral-related activities in the international seabed area, known as "the Area."

4. The ISA's primary role is to manage the exploration and exploitation of marine mineral resources in the seabed and subsoil beyond national jurisdiction. In the Northeast Pacific Ocean, the ISA has granted exploration contracts to various entities, focusing on polymetallic nodules, polymetallic sulphides, and cobalt-rich ferromanganese crusts, especially in the CCZ.³
5. Key activities under these contracts include:
 - a. Exploration: Conducting geological surveys, collecting samples, and establishing environmental baselines.
 - b. Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA): Assessing potential environmental impacts of future mining activities.
 - c. Technological Development: Developing and testing technologies for efficient and environmentally responsible mineral extraction.
6. At the end of WCPFC20 in December 2023, an Observer group by the name of Te Ipukarea Society of the Cook Islands delivered a statement to the Commission that raised the potential implications of deep seabed mining for tuna stocks and the other pelagic species in international waters managed under the WCPFC Convention Area. The Observer group requested that the 20th Scientific Committee meeting consider this matter, with a view to placing this issue on the WCPFC21 agenda. New Caledonia also noted its concerns about this issue.⁴
7. The IATTC's 14th Scientific Advisory Committee (SAC14) met in May 2023 and considered the matter of deep seabed mining in the context of tuna fisheries. [Information](#) presented at that meeting is also being presented to SC20 by an Observer organization to the WCPFC. The SAC14 adopted the following recommendations from the IATTC Ecosystem and Bycatch Working Group relating to seabed mining:
 - a. Be attentive to, and monitor the development of mining in the international seabed area in terms of its potential effects on the ocean ecosystem and populations of tuna and tuna-like species;
 - b. Participate, as appropriate, in the process of discussions on the subject within the framework of the International Seabed Authority (ISA), as an observer and/or through appropriate collaborative mechanisms;
 - c. Collaborate, in a manner consistent with its mandate, work program, and the financial, human, and material resources at its disposal, in research on the potential effects of mining in the international seabed area among others on the ocean ecosystem and populations of tuna and tuna-like species.

³ [Map of exploration areas in the CCZ](#)

⁴ See paragraphs 863-866 of the [WCPFC20 Summary Record](#).

Discussion

8. In April 2024, the Secretariat reached out to the Secretary-General of the ISA and requested an introductory video conference call to seek further information on ISA's activities in the Northwest Pacific Ocean. The call provided a useful opportunity to share views and improve the WCPFC Secretariat's understanding of the ISA's processes and expectations for future activities in the Northwest Pacific.
9. The available literature on interactions between deep seabed mineral extraction and marine fisheries and ecosystems is relatively vast. A quick online search of published research conducted on "deep seabed mineral extraction and fisheries impacts" returned over 15,000 review articles, covering a wide range of issues relating to deep sea, ocean floor activities.
10. The ISA produced a Technical Study (No. 23) as part of its process for developing a REMP. The REMP is one of the necessary measures required by the ISA before any commercial extraction activities on the ocean floor can take place. Broadly, the objective of the REMP is to provide proactive area-based management tools for relevant organs of ISA, as well as the contractors and their sponsoring States, to support informed decision-making that balances resource development with conservation.⁵ To date, the REMP for the CCZ is the only one in place.
11. The current Northwest Pacific REMP is being carried out in two stages. First, a scientific study or assessment will take place, to be followed by stakeholder consultations. When the REMP process is completed, it signals that the scientific assessment phase is complete. The next ISA workshop to discuss the Northwest Pacific REMP will tentatively take place in 2026. Upon adoption, the REMP is reviewed every five years.⁶
12. The ISA has a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Pacific Community (SPC) in place since July 2015, with the following stated purpose:

"...to specify the scope of cooperation between the Pacific Community and the International Seabed Authority in promoting the development of regional and national regulatory frameworks that support the interests of member States of the Pacific Community and their efforts to regulate and manage activities undertaken under their control in the international seabed area; in conducting marine scientific research, including publishing and disseminating research and the results of analysis for the mutual benefit of member States; and in participating in capacity-building initiatives and sharing relevant information on seabed resources, in the light of the relevant provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea of 10 December 1982, notably articles 143, 144, 148 and 150, as well as sections 5 and 7 of the annex to the Agreement relating to the implementation of Par XI of the

⁵ Towards the development of a regional environmental management plan for cobalt-rich ferromanganese crust in the northwest Pacific Ocean: report of an international workshop convened by the International Seabed Authority and China Ocean Mineral Resources Research and Development Association in Qingdao, China, 26-29 May 2018. Click [here](#) to be taken to the report.

⁶ Information gathered from the Secretariat introductory call with the ISA Secretariat, 21 March 2024.

Convention, adopted on 28 July 1994 by the General Assembly of the United Nations in its resolution 48/263.”

13. The ISA’s activities in the Northwest Pacific Ocean present both opportunities and responsibilities for the WCPFC. Notwithstanding the economic potential of deep-sea mineral resource extraction, a range of environmental considerations necessitate careful management. Importantly, this is recognized in the ISA’s REMP development process. The Secretariat acknowledges the overlapping membership between ISA and the WCPFC and the continuing work towards balancing resource use with environmental conservation to ensure sustainable development of the region’s ocean resources.
14. On 27 July 2024, the WCPFC and IATTC Secretariat staff convened online for a joint consultation on matters of shared interest between both organizations. Discussions included consideration of ISA activities in the Pacific Ocean and the need for both Secretariats to be aware of developments that may impact the conservation and management of shared tuna resources. The IATTC Secretariat advised that it is currently in the process of requesting Observer status to the ISA. The Secretariats agreed to continue to share information with each other on developments in establishing relationships with the ISA and on any relevant research material that may become available to promote understanding of the interactions between deep seabed mining and pelagic fisheries.

Recommendations

15. SC20 is invited to:
 - a. Note that ISA activities in the Pacific Ocean region overlap with the WCPFC Convention Area.
 - b. Note the planned activities by the ISA in the Northwest Pacific toward deep sea exploration and the ongoing deep sea exploration activities in the CCZ and the present uncertainties around interactions between deep sea mining activities and commercial fisheries for pelagic species.
 - c. Recommend that the Commission task the Secretariat to engage with a broad range of stakeholders to gather information to support WCPFC awareness and understanding of deep seabed mining activities taking place in the WCPFC Convention Area.
 - d. Recommend that the Commission task the WCPFC Secretariat to apply for Observer status⁷ for the WCPFC to the ISA, to be represented by the Secretariat.

⁷ Observers from the United Nations and its specialized agencies and other intergovernmental organizations may participate in the deliberations of the Assembly if invited by the President of the Council on questions within the scope of their competence. Click [here](#) for more information. At present, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) is an ISA observer but there are no international fisheries bodies with observer status to the ISA.