



Pacific countries told to adopt ‘precautionary approach’ to seabed mineral mining

By Online Editor

5:29 pm GMT+12, 18/06/2012, Brazil

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It’s been suggested that Pacific Island Countries and territories wishing to make use of resources on the deep seafloor for economic returns need to adopt a ‘precautionary approach.

This can simply be interpreted as “in any development where there are threats of serious harm to the marine environment, the lack of full scientific data shall not be used as a reason for postponing that development, said Dr Russell Howorth, director of SOPAC Division of the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC).

But, that particular development, he added should use cost-effective measures to prevent environmental degradation.

The ‘precautionary approach’ has been in existence in Rio principle 15 for 20 years but hardly used in the context of bringing the economic benefits of the resources of Pacific islanders to improve their livelihoods, said

Dr Howorth while addressing Oceans Day at the Rio +20 conference here in Rio de Janeiro.

Under Principle 15 of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development (1992), the application of the Precautionary Approach is defined as “In order to protect the environment, the precautionary approach shall be widely applied by States according to their capabilities. Where there are threats of serious or irreversible damage, lack of full scientific certainty shall not be used as a reason for postponing cost-effective measures to prevent environmental degradation.”

Dr Howorth also revealed a ground breaking advisory opinion by the International Tribunal of the Law of the Sea Seabed Disputes Chamber which ruled that the precautionary approach is a legal requirement for States sponsoring deep sea mining activities.

“The same advisory opinion also gave a significant indication that the ‘precautionary approach is on its way to becoming a binding legal principle of international customary law more generally.

Scientific research and exploration of deep sea minerals have been ongoing in the Pacific Islands region in the last 40 years. Since its inception in 1972, the then Pacific Islands Applied Geoscience Commission (SOPAC) was instrumental in the evaluation of seafloor minerals that occur within the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) of Pacific Island Countries and Territories, in collaboration with developed countries including the USA, Australia, France, Korea, Japan and Germany.

These early efforts have led to the discovery of some potential seafloor mineral deposits within the EEZs of Cook Islands, Papua New Guinea, Tonga, Marshall Islands, Fiji and Kiribati, said Dr Howorth.

“Beyond the region under national jurisdiction, large areas of the Clarion Clipperton Zone of the Pacific Ocean are undergoing mineral exploration – these activities are overseen by the International Seabed Authority.

The SOPAC director said recent interests in deep seafloor mineral deposits have been revived in a number of Pacific Island Countries where a number of entities have either been granted or applied for commercial exploration licenses.

“This new development is largely attributed to sustained increase in global metal demand along with land resources becoming increasingly stretched.

“Additionally, new discoveries of high grade precious and base metals on the seafloor in Papua New Guinea and Tonga in recent years coupled with the granting of an offshore mining lease in Papua New Guinea in early 2011 have demonstrated the increasing interest in deep seafloor mineral resources in the Pacific islands region.

Also, in 2011 the International Seabed Authority (ISA) granted exploration licenses to Nauru Ocean Resources Inc (NORI – Nauru registered company) and Tonga Offshore Mining Limited (TOML – a Tonga sponsored company) to explore identified areas in the International Seabed Area (commonly known as “the Area”).

“This is indeed a significant milestone for Nauru and Tonga, and they must be congratulated for embarking on this new initiative that resulted in joint venture partnerships with exploration companies to explore ‘the Area’, providing the opportunity for this industry to help these countries meet their development goals.

“This was also a significant milestone for the ISA and the international community as it was the first time developing states had been able to participate in the Area and sets an important precedent for other developing states to follow, said Dr Howorth.

As the demand for minerals continues to rise, along with the environmental and social costs of land-based mining, seafloor mineral deposits will almost certainly play an increasingly important role in supplying society with an acceptable means of obtaining the metals needed to meet global development objectives.

“The lack of access to metals (for example copper and rare earths) at affordable prices is a

serious hindrance to social development and must be overcome if development objectives are to be achieved, and if we are to build affordable clean energy technologies on a global scale required to create a "Green Economy."

Dr Howorth said because of the very high costs of collecting data to help build the knowledge base for Pacific Island Countries through exploration in the deep sea environment, this work must be carried out in partnership with the private sector, which is in a position to manage the financial risks.

"An EU-funded SPC Deep Sea Minerals Project is assisting Pacific Island countries to put in place law and policy to manage responsibly this relationship with private entities. The aim is to ensure the implementation of the Precautionary Approach and other international environmental law standards, and also to provide a stable regulatory environment providing comfort to private entities and their financiers, and to concerned citizens and commentators alike," said Dr Howorth.

The total exclusive economic zone of 22 Pacific Island Countries and Territories is around 30 million square kilometers, four times the land area of Brazil's 8.5 million square kilometers, which is the fifth largest country in the world.

SOURCE:PACNEWS