

Fact Sheet: What's at Stake for the Ocean at the International Seabed Authority (ISA) Assembly Meeting

In advance of a controversial ISA meeting to be held in person on December 6-10, this fact sheet lays out basic details about the ISA, provides an overview of its plans for opening up the ocean to mining, and outlines opposition to the meeting from member countries, scientists, NGOs and others.

The International Seabed Authority (ISA) is the international body mandated under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea to regulate and control mining activities in the half of the world's ocean that lies beyond national jurisdictions--known as the international seabed area. Currently, 167 countries and the EU are members.

Responsible for ensuring the "effective protection" of the marine environment, the ISA must guarantee that any mining activities in the international seabed area are carried out for the "benefit of (hu)mankind."

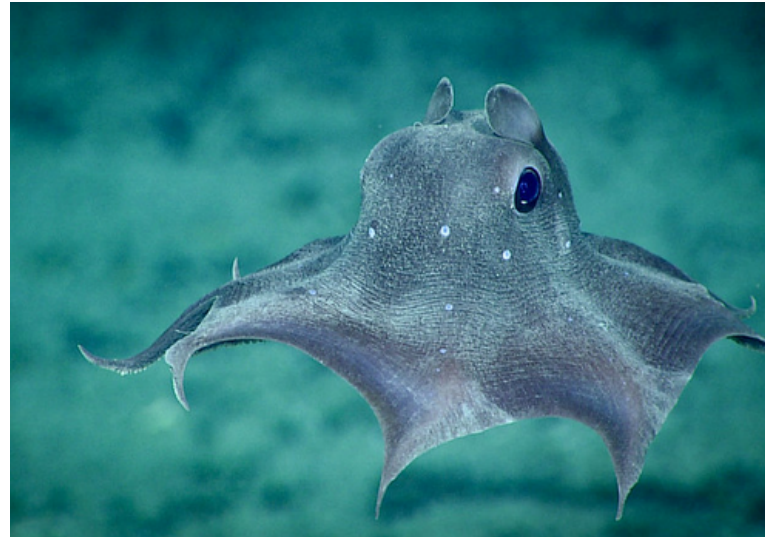
Commercial-scale mining in the international seabed area, if it ever becomes a reality, can only be carried out with the ISA's authorization.

The ISA comprises two principal bodies: the Assembly, which represents all 168 members, and a 37-member Council elected by the Assembly.

- The Council has two advisory bodies:
 - The 30-member Legal and Technical Commission advises the Council on all matters relating to the exploration and exploitation of marine resources rich in minerals: polymetallic nodules, polymetallic sulphides and ferromanganese crusts.
 - The 15-member Finance Committee deals with budgetary and related matters.

The ISA is based in Kingston, Jamaica.

The ISA has granted a deep-sea mining exploration contract for every application it has received, amounting to **31 contracts covering some 1.3 million square kilometers of seabed.**



The dumbo octopus is one of the deep sea species under potential threat from ocean mining. CC NOAA

ISA Action to Date Around Ocean Mining

- Countries and contractors have been actively exploring the deep ocean for target mining sites.
- The ISA has granted a deep-sea mining exploration contract for every application it has received, amounting to 31 contracts covering some 1.3 million square kilometers of seabed.
 - The contracts currently involve 22 different countries, including Brazil, Belgium, China, France, Germany, Japan, Nauru and the UK.
 - Fifteen countries and one intergovernmental consortium currently have contracts for the exploration of polymetallic nodules, seven countries for the exploration of polymetallic sulphides, and five for the exploration of cobalt-rich ferromanganese crusts.
- The ISA is now working on completing a set of exploitation-phase regulations so that commercial operations can begin.

The Two-Year Rule

- The ISA is pushing to complete regulations by July-2023 in response to the triggering of the “two-year rule” in June by Nauru.
- This clause in the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea requires the ISA to consider a country’s application for an exploitation license within two years of the country notifying the ISA of their intentions to begin mining.
- If exploitation regulations have not been finalized by that deadline, the ISA must still consider the application against the draft text of the regulations.



ISA is now on a 2-year countdown to decide on opening up critically vulnerable ocean ecosystems to mining.

The Agenda for the Next ISA Meeting

- Expected to take place December 6-15, 2021, the next ISA meeting aims to rapidly move forward on their roadmap for completing regulations on ocean mining and deciding whether to grant extensions to the seven exploration contracts due to expire this year.
- Only those countries that attend in person will have the opportunity to vote, and given continued travel restrictions globally, there is a risk that the ISA Council will not be able to complete any business if fewer than 19 members attend and a quorum is not reached.

Criticism of ISA

- Critics of the ISA argue that the body lacks transparency, sufficient monitoring and compliance, and a scientific committee to provide expertise on the full range of issues on which it must advise.
- Given the overlap between countries that are active members of the ISA and those that have requested mining contracts, it has also been critiqued for its multiple conflicts of interest.
- Read more about these criticisms in-depth [here](#).

Opposition to Ocean Mining

- Groups directly involved in the ISA process have issued letters warning that two years is not a sufficient amount of time to complete the research needed to fully inform the development of regulations. These include letters from the [Deep Ocean Stewardship Initiative](#), a group of [African nations party to ISA](#), and members of the body’s [Latin America and Caribbean group](#).
- A global group of more than 600 leading ocean scientists have signed a [scientist statement](#), also in [Spanish](#) and [French](#), urging a moratorium on ocean mining until sufficient scientific information on potential environmental impacts can be collected.
- Several businesses have also supported a moratorium on ocean mining. These include [BMW](#), [Volvo](#), [Samsung](#), and Philips, which recently signed a [Business Statement Supporting a Moratorium on Deep Seabed Mining](#).
 - Additionally, in a [report on responsible sourcing](#), Microsoft states: “Microsoft has established a moratorium on using minerals sourced through deep seabed mining until the proper research and scientific studies have been completed.”
- NGOs and civil society have also issued calls for a moratorium.

Resources:

This fact sheet was adapted from a Deep Sea Conservation Coalition fact sheet, [Deep-sea mining: is the International Seabed Authority fit for purpose?](#), which provides additional details about the ISA.

- Deep Sea Conservation Coalition: [Deep-Seabed Mining](#)
- WWF: [No Deep Sea Mining](#)
- [Deep Sea Mining Science Statement](#)