



OFFICE OF THE PRIME MINISTER
HON MARK BROWN
GOVERNMENT OF THE COOK ISLANDS

Honourable Mark Brown Keynote speech at the
Cobalt Institute Webinar 2022:
Cook Islands seabed minerals

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Kia Orana and warm greetings from the Government and people of the Cook Islands.

First, let me say how delighted I am to once again have the opportunity to participate in a Cobalt Institute event. Deep Sea Minerals and how we address the related challenges and opportunities sits at the core of many debates about the efficacy of harvesting the seabed resources of the deep ocean.

We are a Polynesian nation, made up of 15 islands located in the heart of the South Pacific, some three thousand miles south of Hawaii. Tourism has for years been by far our biggest income earner, with many visitors enjoying the natural beauty and culture of our islands. COVID of course devastated our tourism industry and while it is slowly beginning to recover, the pandemic provided the Cook Islands with stark evidence of how vulnerable we are to external shocks.

However, our country's natural beauty and our vibrant culture is not our only resources. We are an ocean nation. Our ocean, is the lifeblood of the Cook Islands. It sustains us. It provides us with a source of food and income. It is part of our identity. As people of the ocean, we care for it.

We take its management as seriously today as our forefathers did a thousand years ago when they first settled our islands during the great voyages of discovery by the Polynesian seafarers who navigated our vast Moana Nui o Kiva. For our forefathers – and for us today – our role and responsibility as custodians of our ocean is important to us.

Forty years of ocean research in our waters suggests that as much as 12 billion tonnes of polymetallic nodules, rich in valuable metals, are spread across the Cook Islands seafloor. Estimates of the cobalt contained in these nodules is in the region of 21 million tonnes, which is significant when you consider that in 2021, global cobalt production was about 170 thousand tonnes.

The demand for these minerals is growing. Sparked by the need to combat climate change the world is focused on developing clean energy sources and transitioning to a low carbon economy.

In order to achieve this, the International Energy Agency estimated in 2021 that mineral supply for clean energy technologies will need to grow six-fold by 2040. And that, cobalt supply will need to expand 21-fold. We know that the minerals located in our deep ocean could potentially help meet this need.

Securing access to what is now strategic metals has never been more important. I note the lengths that battery manufacturers are going to, to ensure their access to the metals

needed to produce batteries for electric vehicles. However, as we have seen in statements from some prominent car manufacturers, demand is also linked to how responsibly the resource is obtained. The challenge then is how do we achieve this? How do we responsibly and sustainably obtain from the seafloor the metals necessary to facilitate the green transition?

My government is committed to building a seabed minerals sector based on best principles and practices, supported by a robust legal framework, and in harmony with our high environmental, social and cultural values.

I believe that the keys for us achieving this are:

- Firstly: Improving our understanding of the marine environment
- Secondly: Developing and testing innovative technologies
- Thirdly: Science-based decision making
- Fourthly: Putting in place robust regulatory frameworks
- And lastly, bringing our people along on the journey

Understanding our marine environment

In the Cook Islands we have recently issued our first ever Seabed Minerals Exploration Licences. What we hope to gain from this first and foremost is a better understanding of our deep ocean environment. While from an economic perspective it is important for our licence holders to develop a more precise estimation of the resource in their allocated area, they too appreciate the critical importance of gathering environmental data, and with up to two thirds of their exploration budgets focused on environmental research. This

information will be fundamental for establishing an environmental baseline against which the impacts of mineral harvesting technologies can be measured.

Developing and testing innovative technologies

Indeed, the exploration licences we have issued also allow licence holders to develop and test their technologies in a controlled manner. They will be required to measure the environmental impacts of their tests, to understand the potential risks, and to develop mitigation strategies and refine their technological approaches. I have been pleased to hear of efforts made to date to develop technologies that minimise environmental impacts. All of this I might add is before we have even made the decision on whether to allow nodule harvesting.

The onus is on our licence holders to be innovative – we cannot change the environment in which they operate but they can adapt their technology. I put this challenge to the industry – be innovative – bring your best game – the stakes are high and those that develop the best technology will most likely be the ones that are successful when decisions are made.

Science-based decision making

In the Cook Islands, we have adopted the precautionary approach to making decisions about the development of our seabed minerals resources. This aligns with our values and our Marae Moana principles which have the primary purpose of protecting and conserving the ecological, biodiversity and heritage values of the Cook Islands marine environment across our entire EEZ. The information gathered during the exploration phase will be vital for ensuring that future decisions about whether to allow minerals harvesting to proceed are science based.

Regulation and governance

While the Cook Islands are in the early stages of exploration and decisions on whether to allow harvesting are still some way off, we need to look ahead. If it is demonstrated that seabed minerals can be harvested responsibly and sustainably with no serious harm to the environment, and we decide to allow it, we will need to make sure that a robust regulatory framework is in place to govern it.

Through the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, we have a sound and rigorous legal regime within which the sustainable development of seabed minerals can take place, and with environmental protection front and centre.

Furthermore, the Cook Islands has the benefit of learning from the experiences as well as the practices and processes of other jurisdictions. This includes from countries with deep seabed minerals in their waters, the international Area governed by the International Seabed Authority, and also similar extractive industries both offshore and terrestrially.

Bringing our people along on the journey

As the Prime Minister of the Cook Islands I also have the added responsibility of considering our economic prosperity and the will of our people. This has meant that we have placed great importance on taking our people with us on this journey. Our licensing process was driven by Cook Islanders and engagement with our communities is one of our key priorities.

We have engaged with our communities on all of our islands, our schools, our traditional and religious leaders and we have a responsibility to continue to do so in an open and

transparent manner. We have made it clear to our licence holders that they need to dedicate resources to providing trustworthy and useful data to help all our stakeholders make informed decisions.

I want our people to be the best informed citizens in the world when it comes to seabed minerals. They need to have easy access to an extensive fact-based body of knowledge. So that they can form their own views and engage in well-informed, meaningful dialogue on our sector's development, which is ultimately for their benefit.

Closing

In closing, it is clear to me that there will be many challenges to building a successful seabed minerals sector and that overcoming them will require collaboration and understanding with all stakeholders, but especially with our Cook Islands people. It is my hope that we will see Governments, Civil Society, Industry and our Communities collaborating to develop this sector in a responsible and sustainable way for the betterment of humankind.

I also understand that different aspects of the seabed minerals sector are more important to different stakeholders. Therefore, I am glad that organisations like the Cobalt Institute are providing forums that bring the issues surrounding seabed minerals to the surface in a meaningful and constructive way.

Thank you very much for your time

God bless you, Kia Orana, Kia Manuia!

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