



Legal and Technical Commission

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Agenda item 6

**Status of the relinquishment of areas under contracts
for exploration**

Request by the Institut français de recherche pour l'exploitation de la mer to defer relinquishment of part of its contract area

Note by the Secretariat

I. Background

1. The contract for exploration for polymetallic sulphides between the Institut français de recherche pour l'exploitation de la mer (Ifremer) and the International Seabed Authority was signed on 18 November 2014.
2. Pursuant to regulation 27 of the regulations on prospecting and exploration for polymetallic sulphides in the Area, Ifremer is required to relinquish at least 50 per cent of the original area allocated to it by 18 November 2022, being the end of the eighth year from the date of the contract, and at least 75 per cent of the original area allocated to it by 18 November 2024, being the end of the tenth year from the date of the contract.
3. By a letter dated 10 May 2020 addressed to the Secretary-General, Ifremer requested a one-year deferment of the schedule of relinquishment to 18 November 2023 for the first relinquishment and 18 November 2025 for the second relinquishment.

II. Justification of the contractor for the deferment of relinquishment

4. Ifremer explained that, to fulfil its programme of activities, it had planned an exploration campaign for mid-2022 with a view to undertaking high-resolution mapping. The key equipment for this work is an autonomous underwater vehicle, the Uly^x, which was developed for high-resolution mapping down to a depth of 6,000 metres. Uly^x is the result of a six-year development programme, started in 2016



by Ifremer in partnership with renowned industrial players in the field of deep-sea systems and technology.

5. Ifremer clarified that the integration, development and validation phase of the final autonomous underwater vehicle system had unfortunately been considerably delayed by the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic and that the purchase of equipment, manufacture of subsystems and assembly had been delayed because of the measures put in place by the French Government to deal with the pandemic during 2020. The basic system of the vehicle had only been shipped to Ifremer in October 2020, after a six months' delay.

6. This delay pushed back subsequent phases of the development activities, namely, sea trials to validate the full functionality, payloads, mission management and system security of the autonomous underwater vehicle, as well as three technical campaigns to validate shallow-water systems. In addition, sea trials on a 29-metre coastal vessel, *L'Europe*, have been affected by restrictions on on-board crew occupancy under current government regulations. Unfavourable weather conditions further delayed the sea trial programme.

7. The request by Ifremer is based on paragraph 6 of regulation 27, which provides that the Council may, at the request of the contractor, and on the recommendation of the Legal and Technical Commission, in exceptional circumstances, defer the schedule of relinquishment, and that such exceptional circumstances must be determined by the Council and must include, inter alia, consideration of prevailing economic circumstances or other unforeseen exceptional circumstances arising in connection with the operational activities of the contractor.

III. Review by the Legal and Technical Commission

8. Pursuant to paragraph 6 of regulation 27, the Secretary-General notified Ifremer that its request would be placed on the agenda of the present meeting of the Legal and Technical Commission for consideration and recommendation to the Council.

9. The Commission is invited to consider the request by Ifremer for a deferment of its relinquishment, taking into consideration the justification provided by the contractor and the situation of the COVID-19 pandemic, and to make a recommendation to the Council, as provided for in paragraph 6 of regulation 27.
