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Report of the Chair of the Legal and Technical Commission on the work of the Commission at its thirty-first session

Report of the Chair of the Legal and Technical Commission on the work of the Commission at the first part of its thirty-first session

I. Introduction

1. The first part of the thirty-first session of the Legal and Technical Commission of the International Seabed Authority was held from 23 February to 6 March 2026. A total of 33 members participated in the meetings. Mark Alcock contributed to the consideration of agenda items via email.
2. The Commission noted that, despite the resignation of 2 members, the participation of 33 members represented a significant increase compared with its previous meeting. The Commission reiterates its request to member States to ensure that nominated members remain actively engaged in its work and are provided with adequate time and resources to fully participate in each two-week meeting of the session.
3. On 23 February, the Commission elected Sissel Eriksen (Norway) as Chair and Edwin Egede (Nigeria) as Vice-Chair. The Commission thanked Erasmo Lara Cabrera (Mexico), who successfully concluded his term as Chair of the Commission. On the same date, the Commission reviewed and took note of intersessional activities relating to its work carried out between July 2025 and February 2026.

II. Activities of the contractors

A. Report on the status of the contracts for exploration and periodic reviews of the implementation of plans of work for exploration

4. On 23 February, the Commission took note of the report of the Secretary-General on the status of contracts for exploration ([ISBA/31/C/3](#)), including the review of contractors' five-year periodic reports, updates regarding extension agreements and the status of relinquishments.

* [ISBA/31/C/L.1](#).



5. The Commission was also updated on the submission by UK Seabed Resources Ltd. (UKSR) of its revised programme of activities for the third five-year period under the UKSR I contract, as well as the submission of a periodic review report in respect of the UKSR II contract.

6. The Commission provided suggestions aimed at strengthening and clarifying the periodic report review processes undertaken by the secretariat. The Commission also heard a briefing on the outcomes of the eighth annual contractors' meeting held in Goa, India, in September 2025, and was provided with feedback on the items relevant to its work.

B. Implementation of training programmes under plans of work for exploration and allocation of training opportunities

7. On 23 February, the Commission heard a briefing on the status of implementation of training programmes since July 2025. It noted that since 1994 a total of 568 training opportunities had been offered to personnel of developing States and the Authority through contractors' training programmes. Of this figure, 46% of placements had gone to the African Group, 34% to the Asia and Pacific Group, 1% to the Eastern European Group and 19% to the Group of Latin American and Caribbean States. A breakdown by gender shows that 61% of training placements had gone to men and 39% to women.

8. The Commission noted that, for 2025, 64 training opportunities had been offered, for which 513 applications had been received; 26% of applicants were women, and 48% of selected candidates were duly qualified women. This represented a near 50/50 gender balance, in keeping with the mandate for gender and geographical balance, and in line with the Authority's commitment under the Women in Deep-Sea Research project.¹

9. Between July 2025 to February 2026, the Commission selected 29 first-ranked candidates and 23 reserve candidates for training placements. During the thirty-first session, the Commission continued its selection process in respect of four additional training opportunities under three contracts for exploration for polymetallic nodules, namely one Master's fellowship offered by Tonga Offshore Mining Ltd., one Master's fellowship offered by Nauru Ocean Resources Inc. and two professional training placements offered by Global Sea Mineral Resources NV. A breakdown of the selection of candidates by training programme under plans of work for exploration for the period from July 2025 to March 2026 is contained in document [ISBA/31/LTC/5](#).

C. Consideration of annual reports of contractors

Assessment of contractors whose performance may not be fully aligned with their contractual obligations

10. The Commission continued work initiated during the twenty-ninth session on assessing the performance of contractors in accordance with the criteria outlined in document [ISBA/29/LTC/5](#), including the checklists and associated processes. On 23, 26 and 27 February and 2 to 4 March, the Commission reviewed responses from the nine contractors identified at its previous session as requiring specific attention.

¹ This is one of the eight voluntary commitments registered by the Authority at the 2017 and 2022 United Nations Ocean Conferences, namely #OceanAction40786 on enhancing the role of women in marine scientific research.

It noted that while some contractors had provided satisfactory responses, other responses required further clarification and review.

11. The Commission agreed to transmit additional questions to the relevant contractors, requesting that all written responses be submitted to the secretariat by 31 May 2026. The Commission will continue its consideration of the matter as part of the review of the annual reports during the second part of its meetings and report to the Council accordingly.

Implementation of the Council's decision relating to a request for additional information from contractors at risk of non-compliance with their contractual obligations

12. The Commission was informed of the steps taken by the secretariat to implement paragraphs 9 and 10 of the decision of the Council in relation to the report of the Chair of the Commission ([ISBA/30/C/19](#)). The key findings by the Commission in relation to the responses received from all contractors are contained in an addendum to the present report ([ISBA/31/C/4/Add.1](#)).

D. Consideration of applications for extension of contracts

13. The Commission noted that eight applications for extension of approved plans of work for exploration for polymetallic nodules had been received from the following contractors, listed in the order of receipt: the Interoceanmetal Joint Organization, JSC Yuzhmorgeologiya, the Government of the Republic of Korea, China Ocean Mineral Resources Research and Development Association (COMRA), Deep Ocean Resources Development Co. Ltd. (DORD), the Institut français de recherche pour l'exploitation de la mer (Ifremer), the Federal Institute for Geosciences and Natural Resources of Germany (BGR) and Nauru Ocean Resources Inc. (NORI) (see [ISBA/31/LTC/3/Rev.1](#)). The Commission dedicated 23 to 27 February and 2, 4 and 5 March to the consideration of these extensions in the order of receipt, but owing to the limited time frame and workload of the Commission for the first part of the thirty-first session, it only concluded its review of six of the eight applications, noting that the contracts of both of the remaining applicants expired after the second part of the session.

14. The Commission used its extant three working groups to review the geological and technological aspects, the legal, financial and training aspects and the environmental aspects of the applications. In reviewing the applications, the Commission adopted a two-stage approach. First, it considered reasons for extension and whether these were beyond the contractors' control, which served as the basis for its overall recommendation. The second consideration concerned the comments, questions and recommendations on aspects of how the applications should be improved, especially in relation to the programme of activities.

15. Following extensive deliberations in the plenary meeting held in the first week of the first part of the session, members of the Commission raised various questions in relation to applications in fulfilment of the requirements set out in Council decision [ISBA/21/C/19](#). Further details were requested regarding specific, measurable, contract-area-based plans, enhancements to gap analysis quality, technology development planning and baseline data reporting, among other things. Additional information was also sought concerning underexpenditure and insufficient at-sea training. The Commission's questions, comments and recommendations were transmitted to the six applicants addressing the financial, technical, scientific and environmental information previously submitted.

16. The Commission recalled that, pursuant to paragraph 12 of the procedures and criteria, if it considered that a contractor had made efforts in good faith to comply with the requirements of the contract for exploration but that, for reasons beyond its control, the contractor had been unable to complete the preparatory work necessary for proceeding to the exploitation stage, or if the prevailing economic circumstances (such as those encountered in the global markets and low mineral prices) did not justify proceeding to the exploitation stage, the Commission was to recommend the approval of the applications.

17. The Commission noted that the formulated questions, comments and recommendations to the respective contractors would be reflected in the proposed programme of activities for the extension period, giving due account to the issues raised by the Commission to each request for extension. These will be developed through interaction between the Secretary-General and contractors to finalize the programme of activities as an annex to the extension agreement. Such matters included the provision of checklist tables by contractors, indicating key gaps in information affecting their plans to progress to exploitation in terms of technical or environmental requirements, noting that this would provide a clear context for the description of methods and activities to be carried out during the extension period in accordance with their respective annual schedules.

18. The Commission also noted that in justifying their requests for extension, contractors had referred to two issues. The first was the absence of a regulatory framework for exploitation and the associated legal uncertainty and impacts on key financial, institutional and insurance issues. The second was that of economic considerations, such as the volatility in international mineral markets and prices. Having concluded that the information provided by the applicants met the criteria set out in Council decision [ISBA/21/C/19](#) and that all applicable procedures had been followed, the Commission recommends that the Council approve the six applications. The recommendations of the Commission in respect of each of the reviewed applications are contained in documents [ISBA/31/C/6](#), [ISBA/31/C/7](#), [ISBA/31/C/8](#), [ISBA/31/C/9](#), [ISBA/31/C/10](#) and [ISBA/31/C/11](#).

E. Review of the environmental impact statements submitted by contractors

19. The Commission noted that, on 9 February 2026, the Secretary-General had received an environmental impact statement from BGR in relation to the proposed small-scale testing of an artificial intelligence-controlled nodule collector, Eureka III, to be tested in the eastern part of its polymetallic nodule contract area in the Clarion-Clipperton Zone in the third quarter of 2027.

20. The Commission noted that the secretariat would undertake a completeness check in line with document [ISBA/25/LTC/6/Rev.3](#), following which it would conduct its evaluation of the environmental impact statement during the intersessional period for completeness, accuracy and statistical reliability and thereafter report its findings to the Council during the second part of the session.

21. The Commission adopted a guidance note to aid its work with the support of the secretariat in the review process for environmental impact statements for exploration. The guidance note will also be provided to contractors for their information.

III. Consideration of applications for approval of plans of work for exploration

22. On 8 September 2025, the Secretary-General received an application for approval of a plan of work for exploration in the Clarion-Clipperton Zone from Impossible Metals Bahrain W.L.L. (IMB). An executive summary of the application is available as document [ISBA/31/LTC/2](#).

23. The application was presented to the Commission by the applicant on 24 February (remotely) and 5 March 2026 (in person). A list of questions and comments was sent to the applicant in writing and responses were provided on 3 March. Following the meeting of 5 March, further questions and comments were prepared by the Commission for the applicant. The Commission agreed to continue its consideration at the second part of its meetings during the thirty-first session.

IV. Regulatory activities of the Authority

A. Development of environmental threshold values

24. On 27 February, the Commission took note of the progress made in the development of environmental threshold values relating to toxicity, turbidity and the settling of resuspended sediments, as well as underwater noise and light pollution, by the subgroups of the intersessional expert group. The Commission noted that the Co-Chairs of the respective subgroups had met in Kingston from 18 to 20 February to further refine the report of the intersessional expert group on the development of environmental threshold values.

25. The Commission also took note of key methods and findings to support the development of ecological reference points for use in the development of environmental threshold values for mineral exploitation in the Area. It noted that a zone of impact approach had been used in that regard, building on existing practices from other industries. The report is intended to provide a science-based framework to inform the Commission's development of standards and guidelines, while recognizing the need for social and economic considerations to be taken into account in Council decisions regarding the level of harm that would be considered acceptable in relation to the definition of specific threshold values.

26. The Commission noted that the report of the intersessional expert group on the development of environmental thresholds would be released publicly for stakeholder consultation during the period between the first and second parts of the thirty-first session. The secretariat will assist the Commission with the consultation process in terms of collating comments and feedback on the text. The Commission is expected to consider the report and the outcomes from the stakeholder consultation process in the fourth quarter of 2026 and make its recommendation to the Council during the thirty-second session in 2027.

B. Development of standards and guidelines for activities in the Area

27. On 27 February and 5 March, the Commission considered the status of work relating to the development of standards and guidelines to support exploitation activities in the Area. The Commission agreed to continue work during the intersessional period for the purposes of mapping the proposed list of standards and guidelines and identifying updates to the existing drafts, as well as possible duplications. This exercise will allow the Commission to stand ready to start work on

the matter once it receives guidance from the Council on the next steps that are required and their nature. The Commission noted that sufficient resources would need to be allocated to those reviews. It considered that the existing three-phase, outcome-oriented approach continued to be the right one and would allow for structured and timely completion of the relevant standards and guidelines.

V. Environmental management planning

Development, establishment and review of regional environmental management plans

28. On 2 March, the Commission took note of recent developments related to regional environmental management plans, and planned activities to advance the development and review of such plans over the next three years.

29. In particular, the Commission heard a briefing on the progress made by its drafting group in formulating the draft regional environmental management plan for the north-west Pacific Ocean, and preparations for a workshop to be held in Busan, Republic of Korea, in May 2026. The workshop will be focused on management approaches, in line with the standardized procedure for the development, establishment and review of regional environmental management plans ([ISBA/31/C/21](#)). The workshop will also provide opportunities for experts and representatives of various stakeholder groups to share information and views on the proposed management measures, as identified in the latest draft regional environmental management plan for the north-west Pacific Ocean, before the draft is finalized and released for a stakeholder consultation, tentatively scheduled for the second half of 2026.

30. The development of the regional environmental management plan for the Indian Ocean will follow similar steps, with an indicative timeline for the completion of the Commission's work in 2027. The Commission will further consider the review of the environmental management plan for the Clarion-Clipperton Zone and the draft regional environmental management plan for the northern Mid-Atlantic Ridge ([ISBA/27/C/38](#), para. 13), as requested by the Council.

31. The Commission noted that the recommendations on technical guidance for the development of regional environmental management plans in support of the standardized procedure and template ([ISBA/29/LTC/8](#)) would be aligned with the standardized procedure for regional environmental management plans and revised as required.

VI. Data management

Review of the workplan of the strategic road map for data management of the Authority for the period 2023–2028

32. On 24 February, the Commission welcomed the progress made under the 2025 workplan of the strategic road map for data management of the Authority for the period 2023–2028 and endorsed the directions and priorities of the 2026 workplan. The Commission also noted the progress made regarding the assessment of the Authority's data infrastructure and management, further review of which will continue during the intersessional period.

33. The Commission emphasized the need to prioritize financial resources for data management, recognizing its critical role in effective data collection, analysis, monitoring and compliance.

VII. Matters referred to the Commission by the Council

Development of an election mechanism for the Economic Planning Commission

34. On 26 and 27 February and 4 March, the Commission took note of and discussed the report by the secretariat on the procedural mechanisms for the election of the Economic Planning Commission. The Commission's recommendation to the Council following its review is contained in the annex to the present report.

VIII. Other matters

A. Potential implications and opportunities for the work of the Authority of the operation of the Agreement under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas beyond National Jurisdiction

35. On 6 March, the Commission took note of the report by the secretariat on the potential implications and opportunities for the work of the Authority of the operation of the Agreement under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas beyond National Jurisdiction (ISBA/31/C/2). It noted the Authority's future engagement in several processes under the Agreement, including activities related to contractors' sampling of marine genetic resources, consultations on area-based management tools, collaboration on environmental impact assessment standards, capacity-building initiatives and information exchange mechanisms.

36. The Commission noted the need for proactive engagement with the bodies established under the Agreement to ensure the development of procedures to support timely technical input, particularly in relation to proposals for area-based management tools that may intersect with the Authority's mandate.

B. Further revised consolidated text of the draft regulations on exploitation of mineral resources in the Area

37. On 6 March, the Commission took note of updates regarding the status of negotiations within the Council in relation to the further revised consolidated text of the draft regulations on exploitation of mineral resources in the Area. The draft regulations had undergone extensive negotiations and revisions since 2019, when the Commission had submitted the first draft to the Council. The Commission took note of the broad changes and the key outstanding issues, such as matters related to environmental externalities in the royalty system, financial incentives, liability, inspections and compliance mechanisms, confidentiality, and the development of standards and guidelines.

C. See Her Exceed mentorship programme

38. On 6 March, the Commission heard a briefing by the Secretary-General on the See Her Exceed programme within the context of the Authority's mandate to promote capacity-building and gender empowerment initiatives. The Commission took note of the successful pilot of the programme, which contributed to advancing the careers of women experts from developing countries in fields related to the deep seas. It provided feedback on the potential launch of a legal track within the programme, as well as guidance on the wider dissemination of the Gender Practical Guidance on Promoting the Safe Participation of Women in Offshore Activities.

Annex

Draft recommendation of the Legal and Technical Commission on an election mechanism for the members of the Economic Planning Commission

1. The Legal and Technical Commission has considered the note by the secretariat on the proposed mechanisms for the election of the members of the Economic Planning Commission ([ISBA/31/LTC/4](#)), submitted pursuant to paragraph 2 of Council decision [ISBA/30/C/17](#). In that decision, the Council requested the secretariat to prepare a proposal for election mechanisms of the Economic Planning Commission, in consultation with the Legal and Technical Commission for technical input only, for consideration by the Council during the first part of its thirty-first session.

2. The Legal and Technical Commission recalls that, in accordance with articles 163 and 164 of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, as modified and supplemented by sections 1 and 7 of the annex to the Agreement relating to the Implementation of Part XI of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea of 10 December 1982 (1994 Agreement), the Economic Planning Commission is a subsidiary organ of the Council and, as provided for in the Convention, shall be composed of 15 members elected by the Council from among the candidates nominated by the States Parties, with appropriate qualifications in the area of competence of the Economic and Planning Commission, taking due account of the need for equitable geographical distribution, the representation of special interests and the representation of developing States whose economies are substantially affected by exports of the relevant categories of minerals.

3. The Legal and Technical Commission notes that, pursuant to the 1994 Agreement, it has to date performed the functions of the Economic Planning Commission and, in that capacity, has accumulated institutional experience relevant to the phased operationalization of the Economic Planning Commission, including the establishment of its membership. In that sense, the Legal and Technical Commission highlights the importance of the work of the Economic Planning Commission, inter alia, for the purposes of considering the potential impact of mineral production from the Area on the economies of developing land-based producers of those minerals that are likely to be most seriously affected, with a view to minimizing their difficulties and assisting them in their economic adjustment, taking into account the work done in this regard by the Preparatory Commission (1994 Agreement, annex, sect. 1, para. 5 (e)).

4. The Legal and Technical Commission considers that the approach proposed by the secretariat for the first election of the members of the Economic Planning Commission, based *mutatis mutandis* on the Authority's established practice for elections to subsidiary organs of the Council, is technically sound, consistent with the Convention and the 1994 Agreement, and appropriate to ensure transparency, inclusiveness and sufficient time for States Parties to nominate suitably qualified candidates (see [ISBA/31/LTC/4](#), para. 18).

5. The Commission is of the view that, from a legal, technical and institutional perspective, the proposed elements of the election mechanisms – including the nomination timeline, qualification requirements (including the suggested indication of the areas of expertise required), circulation of candidates' information, application of geographical distribution criteria and safeguards to ensure compliance with article 164, paragraph 1, of the Convention – provide a coherent and workable framework for the election of the members of the Economic Planning Commission.

6. The Legal and Technical Commission further underscores the importance of the Council establishing a clear formula for the allocation of seats among the Authority's established regional groups on the basis of equitable geographical distribution, the representation of special interests and the representation of developing States whose economies are substantially affected by exports of the relevant categories of minerals. In this regard, the Legal and Technical Commission refers to paragraph 15 (d) and (e) of section 3 of the annex to the 1994 Agreement as providing relevant guidance for such allocation, particularly with respect to the application of equitable geographical distribution and the representation of special interests.

7. Taking into account its own experience in election processes and in performing the functions of the Economic Planning Commission, the Legal and Technical Commission recommends that the Secretary-General transmit the proposed election mechanisms to the Council for consideration during the first part of its thirty-first session, in accordance with paragraph 2 of Council decision [ISBA/30/C/17](#), as well as the rationale referred to in the present recommendation.

8. The Legal and Technical Commission stands ready to provide any additional legal and technical clarification that the Council may request in the context of its consideration of the election mechanisms for the Economic Planning Commission.
