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Contact: Emily Jeffers, (408) 348-6958 or, ejeffers@biologicaldiversity.org

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Landmark Lawsuit Challenges U.S. Approval of Deep-sea Mineral Mining

New Ocean Gold Rush Could Hurt Marine Life Before Impacts Are Known

SAN FRANCISCO— The Center for Biological Diversity sued the U.S. government today over its first-ever approval for large-scale deep-sea mining, a destructive project between Hawaii and Mexico that would damage important habitat for whales, sharks and sea turtles and wipe out seafloor ecosystems.

The lawsuit targets the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration for issuing and renewing exploratory permits for the work before completing environmental impact studies required by federal law. This is the first major legal challenge to an emerging global industry that is seeking to extract gold, nickel, copper and other increasingly valuable metals and minerals from the seabed beneath international waters.

“Like mountaintop-removal coal mining, deep-sea mining involves massive cutting machines that will leave behind a barren landscape devoid of life,” said Emily Jeffers, the Center attorney who filed the case in federal district court in Washington DC. “Deep-sea mining should be stopped, and this lawsuit aims to compel the government to look at the environmental risks before it leaps into this new frontier. We need to protect the ocean wildlife and habitat, and the United States should provide leadership for other nations to follow before more projects get underway.”

The lawsuit challenges a pair of exploratory permits that were issued to OMCO Seabed Exploration LLC, a subsidiary of defense contractor Lockheed Martin, to pursue mining work in the Clarion-Clipperton Zone in the equatorial Pacific Ocean, about halfway between Hawaii and Mexico. NOAA issued the first licenses in 1980, but they expired in 2004, and this case challenges their renewal in 2012, which was based on a request from the company.

The deep ocean is believed to contain billions of dollars worth of nickel, copper, cobalt, manganese, zinc, gold and other rare-earth metals and minerals. Extracting those materials has been considered too expensive, difficult and risky for investors, but technological advances and skyrocketing prices for these materials, much of which are used in consumer electronics, have triggered a strong push by the mining industry.

There are now 26 mining permits that have been issued to explore mining, including an active commercial mining operation that has been permitted by Papua New Guinea, the Solwara I project. Most of the permits have been issued through the International Seabed Authority (ISA) for the Clarion-Clipperton Zone which is rich in valuable polymetallic nodules, but the United States asserts claims in the area independent of the multi-nation ISA.

“The rush to strip-mine the deep-ocean floor threatens to damage mysterious underwater ecosystems. If we aren’t careful, this new gold rush could do irreparable harm to the basic building blocks of life,” said Jeffers. “The federal government has a moral duty, as well as a legal one, to understand the full environmental impacts before the mining industry scrapes away our deep-sea resources.”

For more information and to download a copy of the lawsuit, please visit the Center’s Deep-sea Mining webpage and list of FAQs at www.biologicaldiversity.org/campaigns/deep-sea_mining/index.html.

The Center for Biological Diversity is a national, nonprofit conservation organization with more than 825,000 members and online activists dedicated to the protection of endangered species and wild places.



Loggerhead sea turtle photo courtesy Wikimedia Commons/Damien DuToit. This photo is [available](#) for media use.

Alaska · Arizona · California · Florida · Minnesota · Nevada · New Mexico · New York · Oregon · Vermont · Washington, DC
P.O. Box 710 · Tucson, AZ 85702-0710 tel: (520) 623.5252 fax: (520) 623.9797 www.BiologicalDiversity.org

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