

Review of Seabed Mining in the Northern Territory - Environmental Impacts and Management

Draft Report

What Seabed Mining is occurring in the NT?

There is currently no seabed mining occurring in the NT.

The coastal waters of the Northern Territory have important environmental and natural resource values. They are highly valued by Territorians for their environmental, cultural and recreational importance and the role they play in natural resource-based industries such as commercial fishing, aquaculture and tourism.

The Northern Territory Government has recognised these values and put existing applications to explore and mine coastal waters of the NT on hold during a period of Moratorium. The Moratorium is due to expire in March 2021.

Why has the NT EPA prepared this draft review?

The Moratorium provided an opportunity for the Northern Territory Government to seek advice from the Northern Territory Environment Protection Authority (NT EPA) and other experts prior to finalising a policy position on the future of seabed mining in the NT.

The NT EPA is an independent authority providing its expertise and experience to manage the environmental impact of development on the environment.

The NT EPA's draft report has been prepared in response to the Northern Territory Government's request for a 'review and advice on the actual and potential environmental impacts arising from seabed mining and the management of these impacts'.

The NT EPA has conducted its independent review and formulated its draft advice based on comprehensive consideration of national and international experiences, community concerns and the regulatory experience and reforms of the NT. The report has also been informed by contributions from a range of experts engaged by the NT EPA.

The NT EPA is now undertaking public consultation on its draft report prior to finalising the document for submission to the Minister for Environment. The NT EPA will review and revise its report taking into consideration comments submitted through the community consultation period.

All comments submitted will be collated and passed on to the Northern Territory Government. This Fact Sheet has been prepared to assist the community in understanding the purpose of the review and to provide an overview of the matters discussed in the NT EPA's draft report.

The NT EPA encourages you to read the full draft report for a complete understanding of the NT EPA's views, findings and conclusions.

What does the NT EPA's draft report do?

The NT EPA's draft report provides an independent review of factual information to understand the environmental impacts and management measures associated with seabed mining. The draft report describes:

- seabed mining techniques and national and international experiences relevant to the NT context
- environmental values of the NT marine environment, which include natural, cultural, social and economic values
- potential impacts from seabed mining to these environmental values
- measures to manage potential impacts.

It culminates in a series of key findings and conclusions for government consideration.

The review identifies that seabed mining has the potential to impact the environment directly, indirectly and cumulatively through highly connected marine processes. It identifies that both the environment and other resource industries may experience impacts, while noting that the connected nature of marine values and processes makes it difficult to predict the impacts from various seabed mining disturbances.

The review broadly examines the management approaches that may, and may not, be appropriate, and identifies management and regulatory requirements that need to be established before seabed mining should be considered for the NT. It identifies that effective management of environmental impacts requires:

- robust regulatory and policy/technical guidance frameworks that promote ecologically sustainable development
- clear expectations about information requirements
- clear expectations about 'no go' areas; i.e. areas that are pre-determined not to be appropriate areas for conducting mining activities
- applying best practice assessment and regulatory tools (e.g. independent environmental oversight)
- addressing information gaps and ways to develop strategic environmental and baseline data collection, then managing this data in a central repository
- genuine engagement and consideration of social impacts on all Territorians
- a public register of environmental information and decisions.

The review identifies that relevant information, at appropriate levels of detail, is a fundamental requirement for predicting and assessing environmental impacts and developing appropriate mitigation

measures. Having the right amount and type of information and knowledge about environmental values, environmental processes and the interaction with pressures arising from development activities, is essential. The review identifies many gaps in baseline data and knowledge about the marine and coastal environmental values of the NT, including physical, biological, social and economic aspects.

The NT EPA's review concludes that current knowledge gaps result in uncertainty about the:

- condition of the existing environment
- extent of impacts from seabed mining
- ability of industry to manage impacts
- ability of the environment to recover from impacts.

The NT EPA finds that improved systems of data sharing and management are key to addressing information gaps, and enabling informed decision-making by the NT EPA and the Northern Territory Government.

Is there any interest in seabed mining in the NT?

There are currently 14 existing applications for exploration activities around the NT coast. Since the commencement of the moratorium, the Department of Industry, Tourism and Trade has received one application for exploration of minerals and one inquiry for extractive mineral activities in NT coastal waters.

While there currently appears to be little interest in seabed mining in the NT, the NT EPA acknowledges that this may be due to the existence of the moratorium.

What minerals exist in the NT's coastal waters?

The likely target resources for seabed mining in the Northern Territory include:

- aggregate sands or gravels
- mineral sands containing gold, diamonds and rare earth minerals
- offshore salt deposits
- mineral deposits (manganese, phosphate, bauxite) that are extensions of known onshore resources.

The techniques available for seabed exploration and mining are continually advancing. The mining methods most likely to be used in coastal waters of the Northern Territory involve scraping or excavating the seabed using hydraulic or mechanical dredges, or use of vertical (from anchored platforms) and horizontal drilling (from an onshore base).

Will seabed mining occur anywhere in the NT?

There is unproven potential for shallow seabed mining throughout NT coastal waters. The general location of known resources is provided in the NT EPA's review. In many cases mineral resources are inherently associated with areas of high biodiversity and cultural value.

Specific proposals for seabed mining would need to be based on appropriate information and considered on their merits, including the location and potential impacts.

It is the responsibility of the Northern Territory Government to determine whether or not to support the seabed mining industry, and, if so, to approve specific proposals.

What is the difference between seabed mining and large-scale dredging projects previously approved in the NT?

Some seabed mining activities may be much smaller than previously approved dredging activities, and in some cases dredging activities may result in the extraction of seabed material.

The key differences are around the purpose and location of activities, the frequency and duration of activities, and expectations and feasibility of rehabilitation, irrespective of the magnitude of proposed activities.

Dredging is generally required to maintain open shipping channels, ports and offloading facilities for the oil and gas industry where the seabed needs to remain cleared with no expectation of rehabilitation of the immediate area. Dredged material can be relocated and deposited to other sub-sea locations, used for beach nourishment and sometimes may be used for construction purposes.

Seabed mining is the extraction of seabed material for commercial purposes and comes with the expectation of mine closure planning and rehabilitation, just as for terrestrial mining. The ability to rehabilitate the seabed is much more difficult in the marine environment, as discussed in the review.

What is the NT EPA's role in managing seabed mining?

The NT EPA's role in seabed mining arises through its responsibilities to conduct environmental impact assessments. Environmental impact assessments allow for the assessment of potentially significant environmental impacts of proposed developments on environmental values of the NT. Assessment is conducted in accordance with the Environment Protection Act 2019 and Environment Protection Regulations 2020, as described in the NT EPA review.

The assessment of a development proposal concludes with advice from the NT EPA to the Minister for Environment about the appropriateness of granting (or refusing) an environmental approval for the proposed development to proceed. Where the NT EPA recommends an approval is granted, it identifies proposed conditions that should be imposed to ensure environmental impacts are appropriately managed. The environmental impact assessment process provides government, proponents and public stakeholders with the information needed to consider and make decisions on matters that could significantly affect the environment.

What happens next?

Once the NT EPA review and advice is finalised, it will be delivered to the Minister for Environment.

The Northern Territory Government will then consider all the advice and information available before determining a policy position on seabed mining.

For more information

To view the draft NT EPA Seabed Mining Review and its appendices, then have your say, visit the NT EPA consultation hub at:

<https://ntepa.nt.gov.au/consultation/review-of-seabed-mining-in-the-nt-environmental-impacts-and-management>