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Phosphate, fishing can co-exist - Report

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WALVIS BAY - The Environmental and Social Impact Assessment report by the Environmental Compliance Consultancy reveals that it has been determined that the fishing industry would be able to co-exist with the phosphate industry.

However, the report states that various mitigation measures are needed to ensure a smooth transition and interaction between the industries, and that they would have been incorporated in the Environmental Management Plan of the proposed projects.

The 276-page report was made available for public review until 18 September, and states that no adverse impacts remain high after mitigation. Therefore, all assessed impacts are within acceptable limits, and can be managed effectively.

“A full and comprehensive environmental and social impact assessment has been undertaken for the marine phosphate project. Potential impacts and aspects have been considered in the assessment, and thoroughly investigated against planned activities,” reads the report.

It also states that two post-mitigation impacts were recorded as moderate impacts, which are socio-economic impacts on the fishing industry and marine environment impacts due to seabed dredging - removal of the upper surface of the sediment - resulting in loss of benthic communities.

Furthermore, mitigation for seabed removal includes leaving behind a residual sediment layer (30cm), and leaving un-dredged corridors adjacent to the dredged areas. The ECC's report also states that conclusions drawn demonstrate that the proposed project may contribute towards some cumulative impacts, both beneficial and adverse. The majority of impacts are recorded as low, and two are recorded as minor.

“Therefore, the proposed project, in a wider context, both temporally and spatially, is unlikely to contribute significantly to cumulative impacts. Therefore, the contribution is marginal, compared to the overall activities within the Namibian Exclusive Economic Zone.

The ESIA report outlines and captures the process of the impact assessment for phosphate mining, and recommended mitigation measures to reduce potential impacts. This includes the required monitoring programmes to be implemented during the various mining stages. Fishing industry insiders this week complained that the reviewing period was too short to go through the report, which, with its supporting documents, are apparently about a 1 000 pages. They wanted an extension, but the ECC said the review period is 14 days, and cannot be extended.

The industry has over the years maintained that jobs promised by phosphate are nowhere near the close to 60 000 direct, indirect and related jobs existing because of the fishing industry.

Herbert Jauch, labour researcher at the Economic and Social Justice Trust in Namibia, on Wednesday once again cautioned against phosphate mining, saying Namibia should not put the current resource at risk for 400 jobs.

“Yes, the study says the two can co-exist, but the dangers are not known, and should not be explored at all. The danger is that once you disturb the ecosystem, the damage can take millions of years to be reversed. Now, is that a risk that we should take for 400 jobs? It is reckless and a huge gamble that can have adverse effects on the country’s economy,” he stressed.

The Confederation of Namibian Fishing Associations’ chairman Matti Amukwa told New Era that they have already made submissions to seek clarity on certain aspects of the report.

“We first need that clarity before we can pronounce ourselves on the report”, he added. The possibility of phosphate mining on Namibia’s seabed has sharply divided opinion in recent years.

The initiative has been beset by controversy since its inception. Last year, the High Court declined to invalidate a mining licence awarded to NMP in 2011 after Namibian fishing industry organisations petitioned the court to declare the company’s mining permit invalid. The organisations claimed the NMP project would threaten Namibia’s marine life. The NMP is, however, adamant the project will produce numerous economic benefits and jobs for Namibia from a phosphate-based industry.

The proposed area for phosphate mining is located off the Namibian coast, 120km to the southwest of Walvis Bay.

The eastern boundary of the mining licence is located approximately 40km off the coast.

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