

Mining Company Seeks Trump Support to Shortcut Access to Seabed Metals

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A ship chartered by the Metals Company returning to San Diego from the Clarion Clipperton Zone of the Pacific Ocean in 2021. Credit... Tamir Kalifa for The New York Times

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The long-running battle over whether to allow Pacific Ocean seabed mining took an unexpected turn Thursday when a company disclosed it had been confidentially negotiating a plan with the Trump administration to circumvent a United Nations treaty and obtain authorization from the United States to start mining in international waters.

The proposal, which drew immediate protests from environmental groups and diplomats from some countries, represents a radical shift in the contentious debate over accessing deposits on the sea floor that contain copper, cobalt, manganese and other metals that are needed for electric-car batteries.

The International Seabed Authority, established 30 years ago by an agreement now ratified by more than 160 nations, has jurisdiction over seabed mining in international waters, outside the coastal areas of each nation.

The Seabed Authority has been slowly crafting regulations governing mining, which remains highly contentious because the potential effects of industrial activity on marine life are unknown.

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Now the Trump administration, which has already expressed its desire to retake the Panama Canal and assume control of Greenland, is being nudged by the Vancouver-based Metals Company to disregard the Seabed Authority and grant it a license to start mining as soon as 2027.

Gerard Barron, the chief executive at the Metals Company, announced the maneuver Thursday after it became clear that it could still be years before the Seabed Authority finalizes mining regulations.

Contractors from nations including China, India, South Korea, Japan and Poland are also doing exploratory work in international waters under permits from the Seabed Authority, but none of them have been given permission to start large scale mining.

The Metals Company's application would come in the next several months from a United States-based subsidiary of the company, and it would use a ship registered in the United States. The company would send a giant vacuum-cleaner-like machine 2.5 miles underwater to the ocean floor to suck up potato-size rocks that are loaded with metals.

Mr. Barron said executives had already met with Trump administration officials to promote their plan, which would also require a permit from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

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"The United States has had the legal framework and regulations for issuing exploration licenses and commercial recovery permits for deep seabed minerals in international waters," Mr. Barron said Thursday. "Now there is political will to put existing authorities to use."

Reached Thursday evening, Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick said he could not say if the Trump administration would agree to the Metals Company's proposal and referred a reporter to his staff. Agency officials did not respond to requests for comment.

Image



Gerard Barron, the chief executive of The Metals Company, speaking in Times Square the day his company went public in 2021. Credit...Ashley Gilbertson for The New York Times

The Metals Company, which is publicly traded, has spent hundreds of millions of dollars on exploratory work in the Pacific Ocean, in an area known as the Clarion Clipperton Zone, a remote spot between Mexico and Hawaii. Its most recent annual report, released Thursday, shows it is nearly out of cash and borrowing authority, leaving it with just \$43 million in reserves. “We’re moving forward with urgency,” the company said.

In January, Leticia Carvalho, a Brazilian oceanographer who is skeptical of seabed mining, became secretary general of the Seabed Authority, suggesting that the final regulations could be delayed even longer.

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More than 160 nations have ratified the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, which created the International Seabed Authority and granted it the right to decide where and how seabed mining might take place.

But the United States has never ratified the treaty. And that has prompted the Metals Company to lobby the Trump administration and members of Congress, arguing that the United States is free to move ahead with mining in international waters, since it is not a party to the treaty.

Drafts are now circulating of an executive order President Trump will be asked to sign that would direct his administration to go ahead with this plan, according to two people involved in the discussion who spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to release the draft document.

The Trump administration has indicated it wants to secure greater access to so-called critical minerals, needed for manufacturing in the United States, even if it means making new international claims.

At his confirmation hearing, Mr. Lutnick expressed general support for seabed mining, although he did not say if the United States would defy the Seabed Authority.

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“It is important for American national security that the key rare-earth minerals, we create ourselves,” Mr. Lutnick said at his confirmation hearing. “Fortunately we have the greatest land in the world, and under our seas is the rest of whatever we don’t have on land. We need to harvest it, we need to understand it, and we need to take care of America. We can.”

A briefing document produced by the Metals Company and obtained by The New York Times, noted that before Mr. Lutnick was commerce secretary, he was the chief executive of Cantor Fitzgerald, a financial firm that was the company’s lead banker. The Metals Company also noted that its plans had “strong support from influential members of the Republican controlled Congress.”

But even the idea that the United States might be considering such a move provoked outrage from environmentalists and some nations.

At least 30 nations, from Austria to New Zealand, have called for a delay in the start of seabed mining, arguing that not enough is known about whether it would cause widespread harm to aquatic life and the environment.

“It is a desperate but pretty dangerous act,” said Louisa Casson, an organizer from Greenpeace International, an environmental group that has been trying to block seabed mining. “This could be a negotiating tactic to try to strong-arm the Seabed Authority.”

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Mr. Barron pointed to extensive research funded by his company that found that seabed mining had less impact on the environment than open-pit or underground mining.

More than a dozen diplomats who represent their nations before the Seabed Authority — which is in the middle of a work session in Kingston, Jamaica — were expected to meet Friday to decide how to respond to the plans from the mining company.

“This seems a totally improper move by the Metals Company,” said Georgina Maria Guillen Grillo, a representative from Costa Rica, which has worked to slow the start of seabed mining until the environmental and financial regulations are adopted. “They have been pushing us to work on regulations when they do not seem to really care about complying with legal obligations under the international law.”

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