



***Address by the Honourable Mark Brown, Prime Minister and Minister for Seabed Minerals at the Cook Islands 2020 Exploration Licensing Launch***

*Dome, National Auditorium  
22 October 2020*

Today we realise a vision. One that will take us on a **transformational journey** toward a **sustainable and thriving future**.

At a time when the world is searching for sustainable solutions to the challenges of today and tomorrow, our **Moana Nui a Kiva** provides us, as well as the global community, with possible solutions.

So let us appreciate the significance of today, and what a defining moment it is for the Cook Islands and our people.

I am proud as a Cook Islander that we have an opportunity to play a significant role not only in transforming our future, but also contributing to global transformation.



Our ocean, our Moana Nui a Kiva, is the lifeblood of the Cook Islands. It sustains us. It provides us with a source of food and income. It is part of our identity.

We are people of the ocean. We care for the ocean. And we take its management seriously.



In this year 2020, we are living in unprecedented times, and face multiple challenges as a country and as an international community – from the global COVID 19 pandemic we are currently experiencing, to the pervasive threat of climate change, to the pressures on our limited natural resources. We must address the challenges of today, while ensuring that we care for the needs of our future generations.

We are fortunate to be a **large ocean state** with an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of some 2 million km<sup>2</sup>. It is inevitable that we look to our ocean for solutions and for our survival.

Thanks to God, and firm, decisive action from Government and our community, we are blessed to be COVID-free. However, the pandemic has highlighted our **economic vulnerability** and **over-reliance** on our tourism industry. We face serious challenges ahead, notwithstanding our great collective effort thus far, and our ocean provides us with opportunities to further **diversify** our economy and deliver much-needed socio-economic security and development.

Climate change is an existential crisis facing the world. For the Cook Islands, as an island nation, even more so. It will cost our country hundreds of millions to build **resilient** infrastructure, to **protect our vulnerable communities**, and to **adapt and mitigate against the worst effects of climate change** that scientists predict will come. We must take action to protect our Islands and people.

Through the Paris Agreement, a target of limiting global warming to 2°C, aiming for 1.5°C was agreed. As a result, there is a major shift globally towards a society based on

renewable energy and technology. In order to achieve a low-carbon economy, the World Bank estimates that more than **3 billion** tons of minerals and metals will be needed by 2050. The demand for cobalt alone is going to increase by nearly **500%** to meet the growing demand for clean energy. Indeed, at this point in world history, climate change and the **sustainable and responsible** sourcing of strategic metals are **inextricably linked**.

Many of these critical minerals are found in the deep seabed. Our Cook Islands nodules contain high concentrations of these minerals that are vital for the transition to a low-carbon economy.

Again, our ocean holds the key to meeting some of the world's greatest challenges, such as combating climate change and ensuring affordable and clean energy for all.

That being said, I wish to re-iterate the position of my Government - and the laws we have put in place – we will not entertain any activity in our ocean that will cause serious harm to our marine environment.

The **protection of our environment** is **crucial** to the Cook Islands survival and the health and welfare of our people. In this respect - **strong environmental management and regulation** is a core focus in any future development of the seabed minerals sector.

We will continue to foster strong **ocean governance** to both **protect** and **sustainably use** our ocean.

Our Marae Moana, which covers our entire EEZ, is world leading and provides an overarching mechanism for oceans governance. It provides us with the necessary platform to strike the necessary balance between **marine protection** and **resource**

**harvesting.** This is embodied in the **principle of ecologically sustainable use.** It remains for us the key guiding instrument as we chart our way down the path towards meeting the sustainable development goals and aspirations of our country.



Our vision for the Cook Islands seabed minerals sector is as follows:

***Transforming** the Cook Islands through the **sustainable extraction** of seabed minerals, for the **benefit of the Cook Islands people***

This sector has the potential to set up a **transformational future** for the Cook Islands. One which will secure the prosperity of current and future generations of Cook Islanders.

When extracted in an environmentally responsible manner, metals found in our nodules such as nickel, copper, manganese and cobalt, have the potential to help meet our sustainable development goals.

To achieve that we are building a seabed minerals sector based on **best principles and practices**, supported by a **robust legal framework**, to benefit the Cook Islands and our people, in harmony with our high environmental, social and cultural values.

We will continue to proceed with the necessary caution, taking actions based on **the best available science**, to manage our seabed minerals resources and the protection of our biodiversity.

**Exploration research** is fundamental to understanding our deep-sea environment and nodule resource, and particularly any impacts potential future recovery operations may

have on the deep sea environment. Exploration is also critical to advancing our knowledge of marine biodiversity and ecological processes.

With the resurgence in global demand for strategic minerals such as cobalt, the Cook Islands has received interest from potential explorers wishing to undertake Exploration activities in our waters in recent years.

We as a Government wanted to make sure that we had our legal framework and our operational systems and processes in place **before** we opened our waters for exploration.

To be clear, this is not a process that happened overnight. It has taken many years, and the efforts and hard work of many people, together with exhaustive consultations with all stakeholders, including our traditional leaders, village communities and most importantly, our **Pa Enuā**, to conclude the preparatory work so that we can be ready to move into this next phase.



That brings me to our **launch for Exploration Licensing**, which is the reason we are all gathered here today.

It is my great pleasure as the Minister for Seabed Minerals to **open** the licensing process for Exploration Licensing in our Cook Islands waters.

Having reviewed the licensing process for Exploration Licences – I am proud of what we have set up, and I am confident that we have a **rigorous and robust process** in place to ensure that only the best, most suitable applicants are successful.

As I said before, environmental protection is a core focus in developing this sector. As such, the licensing process we have developed sets high expectations for any potential contractors wishing to operate in our waters, with environmental sustainability at the forefront.

Furthermore, the exploratory research undertaken here, as well as providing opportunities for independent researchers to work alongside, is going to be **invaluable in building our knowledge of our deep-sea marine environment**, which in turn will help deliver on our Marae Moana objectives.

In addition, we are prioritising the employment and training of Cook Islanders, so we are building and most importantly **retaining our long term human resource capacity** here in our country. This sector will see the creation of new job opportunities and possible careers for geologists, marine engineers, crew for research vessels and many more.

The licensing process has been designed to favour applications which offer capacity development **to Cook Islanders**; that engage with our Cook Islands community; and that employ goods and services from our local businesses.

Our vision for this sector is to benefit our people, and the licensing process reflects that.



Speaking of our people, I want to touch on our **Advisory Committee** briefly. You already heard from our Chair of the Advisory Committee Bishop Pere.

I am proud that these passionate Cook Islanders have agreed to come on board the Committee, and I am sure that through the Committee, we will have greater engagement with our people.



This licensing process did not spring up overnight. As I said, it is the culmination of years of planning and preparation.

On that note, I want to thank the **Seabed Minerals Authority** staff as well as the government officials within the **Seabed Minerals Working Group** for their hardworking efforts to bring this licensing process to fruition, particularly over the last couple of months, while we have been dealing with the impacts of COVID-19.

We have also benefitted from the assistance of technical experts both locally and overseas. I also acknowledge our **civil society** and **industry** for their valuable contributions to strengthen our licensing process.

I also acknowledge our close partners **New Zealand and Australia**. I understand our officials have been working closely together the last couple of months to share knowledge and processes.

I am pleased to share that I had an excellent discussion with the Prime Minister of Australia recently, who confirmed that Australia is committed to strengthening institutional relationships on this issue. New Zealand likewise, has offered its support in key aspects of our work. We are committed to fostering a positive, constructive working relationship with our key bilateral partners as we move forward.

I would also like to acknowledge the fantastic technical support of regional and international agencies. These include: the **Pacific Community**, the **Commonwealth Secretariat** and the **International Seabed Authority**, without such assistance, which continues as I speak, we would almost certainly not be in the strong position we are today.

It is through the contributions of these individuals and organisations, and collaborative partnerships that we are able to get this point of launching our licensing process.

And so ladies and gentleman, this is the next step. To those of you here to witness this event – **Welcome to the future of the Cook Islands.**