8 November 2017

RE: Comment on exploration contracts for deep-sea sulfide mineral mining

Secretary General
International Seabed Authority

Dear Mr. Lodge,

We, the undersigned representatives of diverse scientific disciplines from across the globe, are writing to express our concern over the recent approval of application for an exploration contract for massive sulfide mineral exploration along the Mid-Atlantic Ridge (specifically, application ISBA/23/LTC/3). This exploration area includes the Lost City, TAG, and Broken Spur hydrothermal vents and their surrounding deposits that have been the focus of decades-long, high-priority, international research. For example, in 2015, an International Ocean Discovery Program research expedition occurred at Lost City, and another team will be returning to this site in less than a year to study the highly unique “extreme” life forms existing at these hydrothermal systems, which serve as archetypes for the search for life on other planets. These areas have been identified by several intergovernmental organizations – such as the Convention of Biological Diversity and the World Heritage Centre of UNESCO and the International Union for Conservation of Nature – as places with outstanding biological, ecological, and geological significance that should be conserved. We are therefore deeply concerned that the Polish application was recently approved by ISA Council, based on the recommendation of the Legal and Technical Commission, to explore these areas for sulfide mineral mining without consideration of the recommendations of these international organizations or the broad scientific significance of these areas.

We strongly encourage ISA to consider the input of these international organizations and relevant scientific societies when evaluating future requests for deep-sea mineral exploration. Moreover, we also request that such input be a requirement for assessing any future exploitation contract requests. These unique hydrothermal vent sites are irreplaceable, and their vulnerability to nearby exploration, let alone seabed mining, is entirely unknown. Precaution is needed to protect these precious ecosystems from being damaged forever. We would welcome the chance to discuss this matter with you further.

Sincerely,

Dr. Beth N. Orcutt, Ph.D.