

Civil Society Petition: Withhold Endorsement of the Ocean Nourishment Project in Sulu Sea, Philippines

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by International Tawi-Tawi Organization

We, civil society organizations working on various development issues across the Philippines, recently learned about the Ocean Nourishment Project being promoted by the Australian for-profit entity Ocean Nourishment Corporation (ONC) as a solution to Climate Change. It involves the dumping of tons of urea granules into the ocean to stimulate the growth of phytoplankton that would eventually sequester carbon from the atmosphere.

An article on ocean fertilization published in the 12 September 2007 issue of the New Scientist magazine revealed that ONC is proposing to conduct a large-scale field experiment on its patented urea fertilization technology in Philippine waters. It was confirmed from various sources that the target area of urea dumping is the Sulu Sea in south-western Philippines.

ONC and its affiliate entities are collaborating with the University of the Philippines in the Visayas (UPV) in Iloilo to conduct the experiment in the north-eastern portion of the Sulu Sea, near the province of Antique in Panay Island. We are aware that the Philippines is a signatory to the London Convention on Marine Dumping (referred to here as the London Convention) and have existing laws to stop marine pollution, namely Presidential Decree 600, as amended by P.D. 979.

We are deeply concerned on this Ocean Nourishment Project, particularly involving urea fertilization/dumping into the ocean, on the following grounds:

Serious questions on the scientific basis

There are very serious concerns on the scientific basis of ocean fertilization technology, whether involving nitrogen (urea), iron or other large-scale addition of nutrients or other matters. There are on-going debates among marine scientists worldwide on the merits and potential consequences of the technology. The 2007 Nobel Peace Prize winner, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), has noted that "...ocean fertilization remains largely speculative, and many environmental side effects have yet to be assessed". We cannot allow the Philippines to be used as an experimental ground for this scientifically questionable technology.

Potential negative environmental consequences

Ocean fertilization has potential negative impacts on the marine environment and human health, including increased production of nitrous oxide and methane, unintended changes in the planktons that could result in production of harmful algal blooms (HAB, or "red tide"), and unknown effects on the ocean food chain. This is particularly alarming in view of the Philippines' disastrous experiences with "red tide", largely caused by marine pollution, which have severely affected the livelihood of coastal communities and have posed serious health threats on consumers.

Unknown long-term impacts on marine ecosystems

The long-term impacts of urea dumping on marine ecosystems in general and marine biodiversity in particular are unknown. There are no studies that show the potential effects of nutrient fertilization on seaweed and sea grass populations, as well as on yet to be discovered organisms. The fact that the Sulu Sea is home to the Tubbataha Reef Marine Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and one of the few remaining large coral reef ecosystems in the world, is a strong reason to stop this project.

Profit-motivated Scheme

Ocean Nourishment Corporation (ONC) has announced its plans to apply for carbon credits under the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) for carbon-sequestration activity using this technology. ONC has patented this technology in Australia and is also publicly vying for the US\$25 million Virgin Earth prize to remove CO₂ from the atmosphere.

Social impacts

The proponents of urea dumping are brandishing that the phytoplankton bloom resulting from the induced nourishment will increase fish supply and will therefore benefit Filipino fishermen. This is a highly theoretical and debatable claim in view of the serious scientific questions and unknown environment impacts of this technology. Add that to the reality that Philippine fishing grounds are largely dominated by commercial trawlers which have severely marginalized small fisherfolks. The problem of unsustainable exploitation of fish and other marine resources must be addressed directly, not through misguided and potentially highly damaging attempts to fertilize the oceans.

WE, therefore, ask the Secretary of the Environment and Natural Resources and the Director of the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources who are mandated to review applications for research in marine and coastal areas to:

1. WITHHOLD THE ENDORSEMENT AND APPROVAL OF THE PROJECT until all scientific issues on the theoretical claims of ocean nourishment, particularly urea/nitrogen fertilization, are resolved by relevant international scientific bodies based on thorough scientific studies on its safety, scientific soundness and environmental sustainability by credible and independent scientists. No permit should be issued for such activities until the London Convention has issued clear legal guidance as to the legal status of ocean fertilization and how it should be regulated.
2. CONDUCT A COMPREHENSIVE ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT (EIA) of the project to ensure that it will not cause adverse impacts on the marine ecosystem. A thorough assessment of the potential socio-economic impacts of the project especially on the livelihoods of small fisherfolks, should also be conducted.
3. CONDUCT BROAD AND INCLUSIVE NATIONAL AND LOCAL CONSULTATION PROCESSES among communities and sectors that will potentially be affected by this proposed project.