

Benham Rise rich in resources, but not petroleum

BY JEFFERSON ANTIPORDA, TMT ON APRIL 1, 2017 TOP STORIES

BENHAM Rise off the coast of Aurora Province may be a rich source of minerals and other aquatic resources, but its potential for petroleum is almost zero, according to an official of the Philippine National Oil Company-Exploration Corp. (PNOC-EC).

Raymundo Savella, vice president for upstream operations at PNOC-EC, said Benham Rise lacks features that could make it a source of petroleum.

“The potential for petroleum is almost nil. There are no active petroleum systems expected,” Savella told senators during the hearing of the Senate Committee on Economic Affairs on the proposed Benham Rise Development Authority Wednesday.

Savella however said there was potential for accumulation of gas hydrates or methane, which could be explored by the Philippines in partnership with other countries.

Gas hydrates, Savella explained, are usually methane encased in water molecules, similar to ice.

This type of gas is usually found in the very deep part of the ocean or beneath the permafrost in Arctic regions, where pressure and temperature combine to make it stable.

But there has been no large-scale commercial methane production from gas hydrate deposits, although there are small-scale or experimental operations that are mostly government funded, Savella said.

Gas hydrates are believed to be a larger hydrocarbon resource than all of the world’s oil, natural gas and coal re-sources combined, and if efficiently and economically developed, could become the next energy “game-changer,” he said.

“We have to study Benham Rise although there is not much data to work on,” Savella admitted.

Japan, China, South Korea, India and the United States are developing the resource, which could take 20-30 years to become commercially viable, he noted.

“We might as well be partnering with countries who are doing a lot of work on this field especially the Japanese who have been studying gas hydrates since the 1980s,” he said.

Mineral potential

Yolanda Aguilar, acting chief of the Marine Geological Survey Division of the Mines and Geosciences Bureau, said Benham Rise should be explored for its mineral potential, apart from its rich biodiversity.

Since Benham Rise is located within the Pacific Ring of Fire, there is a big possibility of finding metallic minerals in the area, including sulfides like gold and copper, she said.

But it might not be easy for the Philippine government to conduct a geological survey in the area, which is almost the size of Luzon and the Visayas combined, on its own because of the cost.

Senators learned during the hearing that the government needs to spend at least \$50,000 a day just for the rental of a ship, and a survey usually takes a minimum 30 days to finish.