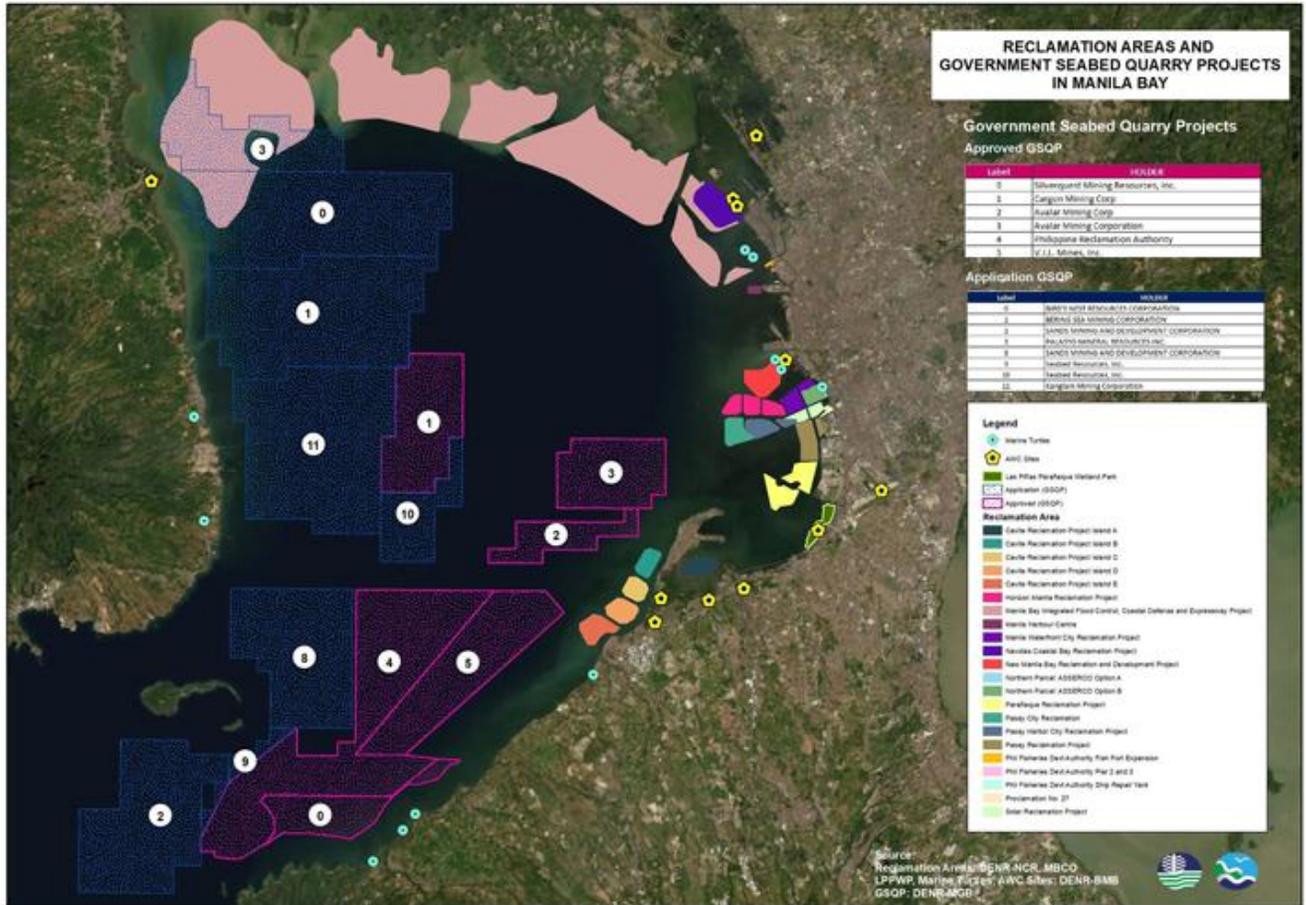


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Reclamation projects in Manila Bay: Environmental impacts vs econ benefits

BY JONATHAN L. MAYUGA
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[Contributed illustration](#)

This DENR graphic illustration shows the various land-reclamation and seabed quarrying projects in Manila Bay.

The 260-hectare Pasay City Reclamation Project is one of several development projects in Manila Bay, currently the subject of an ambitious rehabilitation program by the Duterte administration.

On January 27, an online public scoping was conducted in the area, with the proponents of the project hoping to convince various stakeholders to support the project.

Like the controversial “Dolomite Beach” along Roxas Boulevard in Manila, which gave the Bay Walk area the Boracay-like white-sand beach appeal, the reclamation projects in Pasay, and other similar development projects proposed in Manila Bay, are expected to face stiff opposition.

Environmental impact vs economic benefit

The group, Advocates of Science and Technology for the People (Agham), opposes the 260-hectare Pasay Reclamation Project and other similar dump-and-fill activities in coastal areas despite their promised economic benefit.

Land reclamation is an urban expansion strategy for coastal areas like Manila Bay, a region that stretches from Cavite to Bataan provinces.

Land reclamation expands territories for residential, commercial, and industrial purposes, thus, promises the creation of economic opportunities through massive capital investment, the much-touted needed jobs and livelihood opportunities.

“While proponents of these reclamation projects promise economic development, we see that environmental impacts outweigh economic development,” Agham told the BusinessMirror.

The group said Manila Bay reclamation will adversely affect the environment through mangrove cutting, seabed dredging and dumping of soil on the coast, Agham said via e-mail through its Public Information Officer Jerwin Baure.

‘Just one of many’

The 260 ha project is only one of the reclamation projects in and around Pasay area along Manila Bay.

Two other reclamation projects connect the Pasay-260 reclamation project to the mainland, the Pasay Harbor Phase 1 Island A (210 ha) and B (55 ha).

Other adjacent reclamation projects are also in Parañaque (286 ha) and Cavite (1,331 ha including the Sangley Airport).

“If all these reclamation projects push through, the physical characteristics of Manila Bay, such as the circulation of seawater might possibly be altered, which can potentially affect the Las Piñas-Parañaque Wetland Park, a wetland of international importance that is recognized by the Ramsar Convention,” Baure said.

Seabed quarrying

According to Agham, other environmental impacts of the project will involve seabed quarrying, or massive dredging of sand beneath the sea in Manila Bay, including those in Bataan and Pampanga, for the filling materials.

“The environmental impacts of reclamation are not only in the proposed site but also [in areas] where the filling materials will be sourced just like in the case in the ‘dolomite beach’ in Manila wherein the filling materials came from a mountainous area in Cebu,” the group told the BusinessMirror.

Agham pointed out that several geological hazards—such as rapid subsidence, storm surges, and seismically induced liquefactions—are present in coastal areas around Manila Bay, particularly in Metro Manila.

“Furthermore, much of the concrete components used in many of the infrastructures in Metro Manila are made of Pinatubo lahar sand and other volcanic aggregates. These materials are porous and prone to ‘concrete-cancer’ which can lead to a sudden collapse of buildings, as explained by Dr. Kelvin Rodolfo,” the group explained.

Agham warned that the site of the Pasay-260 reclamation project is susceptible to these hazards, which puts people's lives in harm's way if large infrastructures are built on the area.

Still teeming with marine life

According to the group, the proponents of the project presented "flawed" arguments.

It cited the initial presentation during the public scoping, where the proponents claimed that there is no significant marine life present in the proposed site due to the absence of marine fish, coral reefs, seagrass beds and mangrove forests.

The proponents failed to mention, according to Agham, the plankton communities in Manila Bay, citing a study by the National Fisheries Research and Development Institute.

The study showed that there is high biomass of fish eggs and larvae found in the eastern portions of Manila Bay, which include Metro Manila and Cavite areas.

"We fear that dumping of soil in the coastal waters of Manila Bay will affect the turbidity of the water, which can affect the primary production and survival of larval fish," the group said.

It further asked: "Do you have an estimated number of fishermen who will be impacted by the project? Initially, how do you see this project affecting the livelihood of fishermen living near the area?"

One big ecosystem

Moreover, while the proponents claim that there was no fishing activity in the area, Agham insisted that Manila Bay is one big ecosystem.

"The productivity of Manila Bay is dependent on coastal marine ecosystems, such as mangrove forests and adjacent estuarine ecosystems. Any adverse impacts on these

ecosystems will affect the fisheries production of the entire bay and the livelihood of the fisherfolk that depend on its bounty,” Agham pointed out.

While the project proponents keep on insisting that there will be no adverse effect on the direct impact area, Agham said the proponents also failed to recognize that the project still has indirect impacts to other areas.

“It is necessary that projects involving major alteration in the natural environment must take into consideration both direct and indirect effects of the projects proposed,” the group said.

“As mentioned, the connectivity of natural habitats, especially the project’s proximity to the known fishing sites of other cities, indicates looming effects of the projects on the fisherfolk of Manila Bay, in general,” it added. The group has earlier released statements on Manila Bay reclamation.

Public accountability

Fisherfolks under the Pambansang Lakas ng Kilusang Mamamalakaya ng Pilipinas (Pamalakaya) said the project will make it accountable for the potential long-term environmental impacts of the project in Manila Bay.

“Although the target area to be reclaimed is no longer a fishing community, the project will still inflict damage to the marine resources and biodiversity of Manila Bay, which is the primary source of livelihood of many fisherfolks from neighboring towns,” Pamalakaya National Spokesman Ronnel Arambulo, told the Businessmirror via e-mail on February 17.

“Pamalakaya remains steadfast in our stand against any form of reclamation in Manila Bay because this will bring irreversible damage and destruction to our fisheries and marine resources, and massive displacement of fisherfolks and coastal residents,” he said.

Environmental protection laws

Sought for comment, environmental lawyer Gloria Estenzo Ramos said the Philippines is notable for its strong legal framework for environmental protection and response to the climate crisis.

“Our laws require ecosystem-based management from ridge to reef. Despite this, its fragile natural ecosystems continue to suffer from natural resource overexploitation and unsustainable development practices as the implementation of our laws are weak,” Ramos, the vice president of Oceana Philippines, an international ocean advocacy nongovernment organization, told the BusinessMirror via e-mail on February 22.

She said the state of the country’s ocean is no different, as destructive activities—such as dump-and-fill (reclamation) projects, pollution, illegal fishing practices, among others—remain unabated, resulting in a serious and alarming decline of coral reefs, mangroves and fisheries resources.

Urgent action

“Thus, urgent action for environmental protection, preservation, and restoration should be at the forefront of the agenda of all our Filipino leaders, including those who are seeking national and local offices in the May 2022 elections,” Ramos pointed out.

Along with the staggering impacts of climate change, the country has to respond immediately and mainstream the health and resilience of its natural ecosystems and people by ensuring science-based management through just, inclusive, transparent, and accountable governance of the natural world, she added.

It is high time that decision-makers and citizens alike take a proactive stance when it comes to environmental protection, instead of the usual knee-jerk and short-term solutions. Preparing for natural disasters as devastating as Typhoon Odette means taking climate change and other pressing environmental problems seriously now—more than ever, Ramos explained.

“Our government leaders and elective candidates must ensure the protection of every Filipinos’ right to a balanced and healthful ecology as guaranteed in the 1987 Constitution and collaborate with the various sectors. They should also remain committed to protecting the nation’s marine wealth, including the preferential rights of subsistence fisherfolks of municipal fishing grounds within our territorial waters,” she pointed out.

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