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Plan to alter ocean chemistry hits rough seas

U.S. agency tries to halt 'seeding' of the Pacific Ocean with iron dust to reduce global warming

Kelly Patterson, CanWest News Service

Published: Tuesday, June 19, 2007

OTTAWA -- A clash with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is threatening to scuttle a U.S. company's plan to "seed" the Pacific Ocean with iron dust to offset global warming.

Planktos Inc., which has offices in Vancouver and San Francisco, wants to set sail this month from Florida to dump more than 45 tonnes of iron dust into the sea near the Galapagos Islands.

The iron nutrients would stimulate the growth of phytoplankton, which would then absorb large amounts of carbon dioxide -- an experimental process Planktos compares to reforestation.

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A for-profit "ecorestoration" company, Planktos plans to sell carbon credits from this and other projects to firms such as Vancouver's Wedgewood Hotel and Spa, which has agreed to buy 5,000 tonnes of carbon credits.

The firm launched its "Voyage of Recovery" program in March, mustering its supplies and launching a public relations campaign in Washington, D.C., to promote its "green message of hope."

But in May, the EPA warned the firm it may need a permit under the U.S. Ocean Dumping Act if it uses its U.S.-registered vessel, the Weatherbird II.

Planktos CEO Russ George says U.S. regulations should apply only when a firm dumps levels of a substance that are one per cent or more above the level considered toxic.

His firm's plan would fall "roughly a billion times below regulatory limit," he said.

If the EPA stands in his way, he says he will use a flag-of-convenience ship.

"There are 42,000 large vessels on the ocean in world today. We have shipping agents in Central America working for us lining up vessels that might be able to assist."

Planktos' controversial plan, which has drawn fire from environmental groups and many scientists, will be on the agenda of this week's meeting of the International Maritime Organization in Spain, which sets international shipping standards for matters such as ocean dumping.

In a submission to the group, of which both Canada and the U.S. are members, the American government urges other nations to scrutinize any such project, adding that "Planktos was not able to provide the EPA with any information ... (on) the potential environmental impacts" of the plan.

In particular, the U.S. cites the possibility that the project would lead to toxic algae blooms, and that the decomposing plankton masses would release other greenhouse gases or choke off the oxygen supply in the deep ocean.

Nonsense, says Mr. George.

"The world has spent the last 20 years and more than \$100 million" developing the science behind the plan, he says.

"These questions have all been addressed," he says, blaming the EPA's reservations on "fearmongering" by environmental groups, such as the Ottawa-based ETC Group, which discovered the U.S. government document this week.

He adds that the plan would not only draw carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere, but by restoring dwindling plankton levels, it would help reverse the ongoing acidification of the ocean -- a climate-change-related process that is killing the planet's coral reefs.

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