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ECORD-IODP new opportunities in sub-seafloor investigation

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Scientific ocean drilling has traditionally been conducted within a framework of international programmes. The current phase, IODP (Integrated Ocean Drilling Program), started in 2004. As opposed to its predecessors, IODP has a multiplatform approach allowing to encompass most oceanic environments and therefore expands the scientific opportunities. USA operates the non-riser vessel JOIDES Resolution. Japan operates the Chikyu, a vessel specially built for scientific purposes and equipped with a riser system that allows drilling in unstable formation and down to $\sim$6 km beneath the seafloor. The creation of ECORD (European Consortium for Ocean Research Drilling), consortium of 16 (now 17) European countries and Canada that joined IODP as a single member, made possible the development of the concept of Mission Specific Platforms (MSPs). MSPs are platforms of opportunity contracted on a case by case basis that have allowed scientific ocean drilling to recover cores from ice-covered and shallow water targets that are generally inaccessible to the two dedicated IODP platforms.

The current phase of IODP is ending in September 2013 and the new phase of ocean drilling is being prepared. A new science plan, elaborated by the international science community, was released in June 2011: http://www.iodp.org/Science-Plan-for-2013-2023/. The three current major players (USA, Japan and ECORD) are willing to participate in the next phase and continue providing access to all three platforms, although final funding decisions are still pending at the national level. The new organizational framework for scientific ocean drilling will be streamlined for a more efficient proposal review system and a better use of resources. An international evaluation for drilling proposals will be maintained, but the platforms will be operated independently by the country/consortia providing them.

At the ECORD level, the new organisation may secure more funding for MSP operations and the goal is to implement one expedition per year. The concept of MSP will be expanded to include not only drilling platforms but also sea bed technologies operated from standard R/Vs, long piston coring, and lift boats carrying standard coring or mining-type rigs. With the aim of offering more opportunities, ECORD will encourage and help proponents to seek for additional funding on a project basis, from the European Commission, from industrial partnership, and/or at the national level.