

WORLD WIDE. The Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS) is based in New York. (Photo: Rune Goa)

Norway's offshore acreage beyond its northern shores was extended in April by an extra 235 000 square kilometres, an expansion in which Harald Brekke played a key role.

| Astri Sivertsen



# Setting boundaries

The NPD geologist works on behalf of coastal states around the world to establish how far out their continental shelves extend, and thereby where they can control seabed resources.

Equivalent in size to the UK, the increase in area means the northern NCS now covers some two million square kilometres. The new boundaries were set by the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS), which is based at the UN in New York.

## States

All coastal states have the right, under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, to a zone extending 200 nautical miles from land. But many possess a continental shelf which extends even further out.

In order to claim wider boundaries,



Geologist Harald Brekke.

they must be able to document the seabed geology so that the CLCS can determine how much of an area the country can legitimately control.

Mr Brekke was elected in 2007 to his third five-year term as one of the 21 members on this body. Coastal states worldwide have turned to him for advice and assistance when they want the outer boundaries of their continental shelves approved.

They include Mauritius, the Seychelles, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Kenya, Tanzania, Somalia, Mozambique, Madagascar, South Africa, Mauritania, Senegal, Cape Verde, Gambia, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Togo and Benin.

The question is one of resources, Mr Brekke explains. Without defined boundaries, nobody knows where a country's rights begin and end. "They can't get anyone to invest unless these are clear."

But this is not about petroleum, he adds. Many of the areas concerned lie in deep water beyond the scope of such activity. The primary motivation is to secure possible unknown resources.

"We've no idea what kind of assets might lie in these areas for the future, and this is an unknown world in research terms," says Mr Brekke. "We simply don't know what'll be valuable."

The boundaries are drawn from the point where the abyssal plain meets the

continental slope, and their location is often a matter of interpretation.

Claims must accordingly be underpinned by geological and geophysical data, which form the basis for a recommendation to the CLCS. Its decision is final.

## Ratify

When a country ratifies the law of the sea convention, it has 10 years to submit a boundary claim. Sixty have already done so, and more are expected in the next few years. They include Madagascar, with a 2011 deadline, Canada in 2013 and Denmark – with Greenland – the year after.

When the convention came into force in 1994, only 60 states had ratified it. That figure has now risen to 158.

"This treaty is significant for Norway, so it's important to get the largest possible number of countries to apply it," says Mr Brekke. "The stronger its standing, the better for us." ❄️