By Jejje Muhamudu;

Rwanda and DR Congo have signed an agreement intended protect biodiversity in Lake Kivu and to monitor safe exploitation of methane gas by conserving Lake Kivu.

The agreement was signed by Jeanne d'Arc Mujawamariya Minister of Environment representing Government of Rwanda and Rubens Mikindo Muhima State Minister in charge of Hydrocarbons representing the Government of the Democratic Republic of Congo, on Thursday in Kigali.

Both ministers said they both countries will be committed to providing rules for research, exploration, and monitoring safe exploration of Lake Kivu gas resources.

Mujawamariya said Lake Kivu has a lot of biodiversity and natural resources that are important to human life.

"While exploiting the resources in Lake Kivu, the activities must protect the biodiversity in as well since it is important to human life," she said.

Biodiversity means a variety of plant and animal life in a particular habitat usually considered to be important and desirable.

The agreement considers the potential impact that methane gas exploitation has to produce electricity which must be done by reducing the risk of gas explosion and thus protecting biodiversity.

The methane in Lake Kivu is estimated to have the capacity to generate 700MW of electricity over a period of 55 years.

Rwanda's energy targets are set to get a boost following the government's decision to provide a concession to a private investor to start production of methane gas.

Rwanda's share of the total generation potential is about 350 MW, with the rest being the share of DR Congo.

There are already two private investors that currently extract methane gas from Lake Kivu; Contour Global and Symbion Power.

Contour Global's KivuWatt Project currently produces 26.4MW with plans to produce 100 megawatts during its second phase of work, while US-based Symbion Power

owns two plants all of which are located at the shores of Lake Kivu.

Symbion Power, an energy development company which entered a concession agreement with the government in 2017, separately owns Kibuye Power (KP1) and Lake Kivu 56 projects.

And in October last year, a public-private partnership project between Shema Power Lake Kivu Limited (SPLK Ltd) and government of Rwanda was launched and it is expected to result in a development of 55 megawatts of methane gas, more than double of what the current investor is producing in Kivu.

Lake Kivu water is a habitat for fish, especially sardines that improves the lives of the fishing community and there are also 113 islands located in Lake Kivu on the part of Rwanda which also accommodates various biodiversity species.

Total fish produced from Lake Kivu was 18,879 tons in 2018, amounting to 70 percent of total fish production in Rwanda.

However, the fishing community around Lake Kivu has continued to decry the sharp decline in sardine production as this paper recently reported.

Fish farmers say that the decrease in fish stocks, especially sardine production might have been triggered by illegal fishing and climate change effects.

Mujawamariya added that there is a need for research to evaluate the status of threats and activities affecting fish production in Lake Kivu.

She said many projects were signed and implemented in exploiting resources in Lake Kivu but the ministry of environment was not previously involved.

“Now the ministry of environment has to be engaged in agreements related to projects exploiting resources in Lake Kivu to ensure that they do not pose threats to the environment and biodiversity because we are also in charge of protecting all living organisms,” she said.

Mikindo Muhima lauded both Rwanda and DRC’s efforts geared at safe exploitation of methane gas.

He pointed out an agreement signed in 2017 in Bukavu for common exploitation of methane gas in Lake Kivu.

“We need safe exploitation of methane gas in Lake Kivu for sustainable development in the Great Lakes Region in general,” he said.