



April 20, 2004

Federal Study Urges New Strategy for Safeguarding the Sea

By FELICITY BARRINGER

WASHINGTON, April 20 — The first major federal assessment of the oceans in a generation has concluded that coastal waters continue to be severely degraded by escalating man-made insults.

The report, issued today, called on the government, in coordination with the states, to fundamentally restructure its approach to ocean management so that the degradation does not become permanent.

The United States Commission on Ocean Policy, noting that 51 percent of the country's population lives on or near the coast and coastal watersheds, offered moderately tough suggestions for curbing the overfishing that has depleted fish stocks worldwide and the nutrient pollution that threatens to strangle the ecosystems of the Chesapeake Bay and Puget Sound and has created a huge seasonal "dead zone" in the Gulf of Mexico at the mouth of the Mississippi River.

"Our oceans and coasts are in serious trouble," the commission's chairman, Adm. James D. Watkins, a former chief of naval operations, said at a news conference here today. The existing management system, which spreads responsibility across what he called "a Byzantine patchwork" of federal and state agencies and local fishing councils, "is simply not up to the task" of preventing degradation, Admiral Watkins said.

The goal of the governmental restructuring that he called for would be to use what he called "ecosystem-based management" and to abandon the current practice of assessing the prospects and perils of each species or habitat individually. The report also recommended doubling the current federal research spending on oceans and establishing an Ocean Policy Trust Fund, financed with up to \$4 billion annually drawn from royalties from Outer Continental Shelf oil and gas exploration and exploitation.

Going against the conservative grain at both the local and international levels, the report recommended that the powerful local and regional fisheries management councils be forced to follow the guidance of their sister scientific and statistical councils on fishing limits and called on the Congress and the Bush administration to end the country's 22-year refusal to officially join the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.

The chairman of the White House Council on Environmental Quality, James L. Connaughton, said today that "we are effectively implementing 95 percent of the treaty." He added that "President Bush has put the treaty on the top priority list for ratification and we're working hard with the Congress to assuage their concerns" on issues of intelligence gathering and national security. The long-term concerns over deep-sea mining and whether the convention's provisions infringed on American sovereignty have been largely resolved, he added.

The commission report recommended that Congress elevate the issue of ocean management and

streamline interagency coordination by creating a White House-based National Oceans Council, composed of the cabinet secretaries heading the relevant executive-branch agencies, and that the president should appoint a new assistant to head the council.

The commission, a largely Republican group of scientists, businessmen and government officials, stopped short of endorsing some of the stringent controls suggested by a private study sponsored by the Pew Commission last spring, including calls for creating a web of "marine protected areas," with similar protections as terrestrial parks and wilderness areas, and zoning portions of the ocean for a variety of uses. It also shied away from recommendations specifically geared to limit industrial bottom trawling practices that can destroy coral reefs.

Both industry and environmental groups gave qualified support to the report's conclusions. "We are generally pleased with most of the recommendations," said Linda Candler, a spokeswoman for the National Fisheries Institute, which represents commercial fishing groups. "We are genuinely pleased that the commission recognizes that fishing is not the only human impact on our oceans."

John Adams, the president of the Natural Resources Defense Council, a major environmental group, welcomed the report and in an interview would not dwell on any differences he had with specific recommendations.

"The overall message," he said, "is that there's a crisis out there and it's a very important crisis because we're losing a food supply and a huge economic base for this country, and unless we get to it quickly this will start to disappear very quickly."