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White House Responds to Ocean Commission Reports

ADRIENNE FROELICH SPONBERG

As required by the Oceans Act of 2000, President Bush has formally responded to the final report of the US Commission on Ocean Policy. On 17 December 2004, the White House released the "U.S. Ocean Action Plan," a 40-page document summarizing the administration's immediate and long-term plans for addressing the recommendations of the commission.

The Interagency Ocean Policy Group (IOPG), a group of senior federal officials with relevant policy experience and expertise in the management and conservation of ocean and coastal resources, developed the administration's action plan. The IOPG membership was drawn from eight cabinet and independent agencies with programs dedicated to the management and conservation of ocean and coastal resources. The plan (available at *http://ocean.ceq.gov*) lays out nine action items that form the basis of the administration's response. The first item on the agenda has already been completed: On the date of the report's release, President Bush issued an executive order to create a cabinet-level Committee on Ocean Policy. In addition to recommending and implementing further responses to the sweeping report, the committee will coordinate the activities of executive branch departments and agencies regarding ocean-related matters.

With over 20 federal agencies administering over 140 federal laws related to the oceans, coasts, and Great Lakes, integration of federal effort is a critical need for ocean policy. Specific steps toward the process of integration are detailed in the action plan: "The Committee will convene its first meeting early in 2005.... [It] will develop an 18-month work plan to address a number of the Commission's recommendations, including further actions on ocean, coastal, and Great Lakes issues that address governance principles, filling gaps in legislative authority, and streamlining unnecessary overlapping authorities. Where appropriate, the Committee will work with the States, Tribes, local officials, and others on these actions."

Under one of the six themes of the plan, "advancing our understanding of the oceans, coasts, and Great Lakes," the Joint Subcommittee on Ocean Science and Technology, part of the National Science and Technology Council, will "advise and assist the Executive Branch with national ocean science and technology issues." Specifically, the subcommittee will develop a "Framework for an Ocean Research Priorities Plan and Implementation Strategy" by 31 March 2005, with a detailed plan to be completed by the end of 2006.

Other proposed science-related activities are building a global earth observation network (which would include integrated ocean observations); developing and deploying new state-of-the-art research and survey vessels; creating a national water-quality monitoring network; coordinating ocean and coastal mapping activities; implementing new legislation on oceans and human health, harmful algal blooms, and hypoxia; and increasing the coordination of ocean education. The administration also proposes that the US Sea Grant program be expanded internationally to include Latin America, Southeast Asia, and North Africa.

Reaction to the administration's plan has been generally positive, if cautious. Lynne Hale, head of The Nature Conservancy's Global Marine Initiative, says the White House has taken "a critical first step," but now needs to "reach out to public and private partners in order to take action on the ground and in the water." The Environmental Defense Fund also sees the plan as a positive step. The group is urging President Bush to go even further, noting he has the "opportunity to do for oceans what Teddy Roosevelt did for land." Rep. Sam Farr (D–CA), cochair of the House Oceans Caucus, said he was "cautiously optimistic" about the White House proposal. Farr says the creation of the cabinet-level committee "sets a positive tone for the next phase of ocean policy," but hopes this will not be the only decisive action the president takes on oceans. "The real question today is, how much muscle is the White House willing to put behind their Ocean Action Plan? Are they willing to tackle the more difficult but critical governance issues?"

Among those more difficult issues is the signing of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, which the Senate has been slow to act upon. Another looming issue is the passage of an organic act for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). NOAA was created by executive order in 1970, but the agency's fundamental structure, authorities, and responsibilities have yet to be codified. Although both the House and the Senate held hearings on the issue last year, they did not act on introduced legislation. Now that the administration has issued its action plan, however, congressional leaders will begin pushing in earnest for legislation to address the commission's many recommendations.

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