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Just Another Report, or a Sea Change for Ocean Research?

ROBERT E. GROPP

For several years, ocean science advocates have been buoyed by various reports focusing attention on the importance of invigorating and prioritizing ocean research. Indeed, the US Ocean Action Plan called for the development of a long-range national ocean research agenda.

The wait for this much-anticipated plan ended on 26 January 2007. In a day filled with a White House ceremony and a public briefing at the National Academy of Sciences in Washington, DC, the federal government issued its ocean research agenda. Prepared by the National Science and Technology Council's Joint Subcommittee on Ocean Science and Technology (JSOST), *Charting the Course for Ocean Science in the United States for the Next Decade: An Ocean Research Priorities Plan and Implementation Strategy* establishes a federal and national research framework for the coming decade.

According to Dan Walker of the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, a cochair of the JSOST, the report is unique because it evolved from prior drafts to reflect the breadth of the ocean sciences community. Moreover, unlike a traditional discipline-centered research plan, *Charting the Course* is organized around six societally important themes. Within this framework, 20 long-range research priorities are articulated. Four of these have been identified as high priorities requiring immediate attention: (1) forecasting the response of coastal ecosystems to persistent forcing and extreme events; (2) performing comparative analysis of marine ecosystem organization; (3) developing sensors for marine ecosystems; and (4) assessing the variability of the meridional overturning circulation, with its implications for rapid climate change.

Reflecting the wave of enthusiasm for science education and outreach that is flowing through a growing segment of the scientific community, and perhaps responding to the NSF (National Science Foundation) push to encourage scientists to communicate research findings to audiences beyond the research community, *Charting the Course* includes a discussion of the national need for improved ocean education and public outreach. "This interagency priorities plan represents a significant first step towards strengthening our ocean research and educational enterprise," says Anthony Michaels, president of the National Association of Marine Laboratories. Michaels is pleased that the "plan starts to recognize the importance of blending research and education," but hopes this integration will be further enhanced as the plan moves forward into the implementation phase.

Centrally important to any research plan or agenda is the availability of financial and human resources for the ultimate execution of the research. Indeed, this issue was raised in comments submitted to the JSOST by AIBS in late 2006: "A significant concern with the draft report is that it fails to articulate the funding that will be sought to achieve the proposed goals.... A realistic budget request and multi-year commitment to federal research program managers would seem to be a central element necessary for the ultimate success of the JSOST research plan."

All too often, government documents lack a clear statement of the required financial commitment. Sadly, the same might be said for *Charting the Course*. The report does, however, allocate nearly a page to explaining the mechanisms that will be used for seeking and coordinating federal resources.

Although free of budget commitments, *Charting the Course* "will impact federal funding policy," according to Walker. To illustrate this pledge, senior administration officials joined together at a White House event before the public briefing on the report. According to an administration press release, the Bush administration plans "major budget increases totaling more than \$140 million to support coastal and marine conservation efforts in Fiscal Year 2008." Of this amount, \$20 million would be provided to the NSF and the US Geological Survey. NSF director Arden Bement acknowledged the pledge, stating, "Stewardship of the planet and its oceans begins with a clear understanding of the seas, and science and education are the tools that can achieve it. In partnership with the ocean community and other federal agencies, NSF is proud and excited to support research, discovery and innovation to fulfill the vision of the Ocean Research Priorities Plan."

Now that a long-range, community-wide research agenda has been established for the ocean sciences community, it remains to be seen whether the community will fully embrace the plan and work to ensure that the funds are provided to achieve its ambitious goals. It also remains to be seen whether other research communities will strive to coordinate and define community-wide research programs similar to those for astronomy and, now, for ocean science.

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