



*J. Scott Rainey, Chair
Helen A. Brohl, Deputy Chair*

Vice Admiral Conrad C. Lautenbacher, Jr. (USN-Ret.)
Undersecretary of Commerce for Oceans and Atmosphere and
NOAA Administrator
Washington, D.C. 20230

Dear Admiral Lautenbacher:

We are pleased to present you with initial comments by the Hydrographic Services Review Panel (HSRP) on the Bush Administration's *U.S. Ocean Action Plan*. The HSRP was created in December, 2003, to advise the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Administrator pursuant to the Hydrographic Services Improvement Act of 1998, as amended. As the Administration begins to implement the *U.S. Ocean Action Plan* over the next several months, we hope to provide you with more detailed comments regarding NOAA's hydrographic services.

We support the Administration's recognition of the importance of maritime commerce and transportation and the need to improve and strengthen our nation's maritime information systems, many of which are a NOAA responsibility. We believe the core of that system is NOAA's hydrographic programs (*e.g.*, surveys, charts, and geospatial observations, and the personnel, vessels, and equipment to support them) that must provide accurate, reliable, comprehensive information to mariners. While we enthusiastically support the Administration's commitment to Integrated Ocean Observing Systems (IOOS) and the Global Earth Observation System of Systems (GEOSS), we believe a critical part of these efforts remains NOAA's work in surveying, charting, and geospatial observations, particularly in the busiest ports and shipping lanes. Adequate, coordinated funding for these activities will have the greatest positive impact on navigational safety, economic development, and the protection of public health and the environment.

While the *U.S. Ocean Action Plan* notes that the economic impact of United States maritime trade "contributes more than \$742 billion annually to the gross domestic product and creates employment for more than 13 million individuals," our primary concern is for navigational safety. Accurate, up-to-date charts, based on surveys in accordance with international standards, are critical for all United States navigable waters, particularly given the projected increases in international maritime commerce, short sea shipping, and recreational boating. The coordinated resources of federal agencies, including but not limited to NOAA, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and the U.S. Coast Guard, are urgently needed to address current unmet survey,

real-time observation, and charting needs. Recent groundings and undersea collisions in United States waters and elsewhere highlight this need.

With specific reference to the *U.S. Ocean Action Plan*, our concerns relate less to its contents, with which we find little fault, and more to issues that were merely inferred or actually omitted, including the following:

- The need to complete priority hydrographic survey areas as soon as possible, with adequate vessels and staffing, and sustain this capability for the future;
- A commitment to fully implement and maintain real-time observation systems (e.g., Physical Oceanographic Real-Time System, or PORTS[®]; the National Water-Level Observation Network, or NWLON; and Continuously Operating Reference Stations, or CORS) as a central component of IOOS with direct, practical applications for public health and safety, commerce, and environmental protection;
- Continued use of observation data, particularly through IOOS, for predictive modeling for maritime operations (e.g., wave heights, storm surges), all related to a single vertical datum compatible with emerging GPS technology; and
- Rigid quality assurance controls for charts and other navigational aids produced using NOAA data.

We recognize that NOAA faces the potential for considerable budgetary constraints as we head toward fiscal year 2006. Without diluting the Administration's laudable goals to improve ocean observing efforts, we hope to provide information to policy makers that underscores the considerable needs NOAA faces in ensuring safe, efficient, maritime commerce and recreation by providing accurate, timely information to mariners. With adequate resources, we believe NOAA can fulfill this mandate.

We very much appreciate the opportunity to share these concerns with you and look forward to refining our recommendations in the coming months.

Sincerely,

J. Scott Rainey, Chair
Hydrographic Services Review Panel