

Committee on Resources

Witness Testimony

Testimony before the U.S. House of Representatives,
Committee on Resources,
Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife & Oceans
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Testimony presented by
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President
Sea Grant Association

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee, for inviting me to testify today regarding reauthorization of the National Sea Grant College Program. My name is Ronald Dearborn, and I am director of the Alaska Sea Grant Program which is located at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks. I am testifying today in my capacity as president of the Sea Grant Association, which represents all 29 Sea Grant programs that serve over 250 institutions throughout the nation. The Sea Grant Association is dedicated to enhancing the nation's ability to develop, use, and manage our marine, coastal, and Great Lakes resources.

This year, the Sea Grant Program celebrates its 30th year of activity. The National Sea Grant College Program was created by statute in 1966, and is now located administratively within the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration of the U.S. Department of Commerce. Sea Grant is the only university-based program to employ a broad range of physical and socioeconomic research capabilities to address significant problems in the management and long-term use of our nation's publicly-owned marine resources. The Sea Grant Program is a unique partnership of federal and state government, universities, and the private sector. The Program consists of tight integration among its principal components of research, education, technology transfer and advisory service to provide locally-responsive problem-solving in marine and coastal areas that ultimately benefits all U.S. citizens. We believe that Sea Grant has demonstrated an extraordinary record of service to the Nation which provides returns far in excess of its cost to the taxpayer.

As you know, Sea Grant's statutory mandate is to improve the scientifically-based use and long-term stewardship of the Nation's ocean, coastal, and Great Lakes resources.

Sea Grant specializes in making advances in university research accessible to citizens who can benefit from that research. Sea Grant is unique in its focus on a specific issue, problem or opportunity and then bringing whatever disciplinary expertise that may be needed to address it. We take pride in our ability to play an "honest broker" role in addressing difficult problems and working out collaborative solutions that respect the views of all parties.

On numerous occasions, we have been able to save taxpayer dollars by arriving at cost-effective, nonregulatory solutions to public resource problems that meet important environmental and other public policy objectives while protecting the needs of businesses. For example, in Florida, Sea Grant persuaded the state's Department of Environmental Protection to withhold new boating regulations in Southwest Florida for five years, that would have restricted recreational boating anchorages in fragile habitats. Instead, Sea Grant offered an alternative public education campaign that is teaching boaters, marina operators, and citizens how to regulate themselves using science-based maps and GIS technology to avoid costly governmental regulation and maintain economically and environmentally viable industries. Thus far, Sea Grant's effort has been very successful.

In Maryland, Sea Grant conducted an economic impact study that persuaded one county to eliminate its tax on berths for recreational boats. The study made it clear that the county would receive significantly greater revenues by removing a deterrent to recreational boating in the form of a tax, in favor of the increased economic activity that would result from larger numbers of recreational boats being located in the county.

In Orange County, California, Sea Grant data on the sewage outfall plume in the Los Angeles basin enabled the Orange County Sanitation District to qualify for a full secondary treatment waiver under the Clean Water Act, without the need for a costly additional treatment plant. The Orange County Sanitation District estimates that the information provided by Sea Grant saved taxpayers in the county nearly a billion and a half dollars over thirty years.

Sea Grant's activities encompass an extraordinary breadth of scope, from improving preparedness for coastal hazards, addressing the problem of aquatic nuisance species, pollution prevention and beach cleanup, working with coastal managers and developers on responsible approaches to coastal growth, and developing revolutionary new scientific tools as we have done in the area of marine biotechnology. Sea Grant is also a partner in maintaining the biological and economic health of our nation's fisheries. Because of its academic home, Sea Grant often brings new knowledge and approaches to state agencies and fishery council processes. For instance in my home state of Alaska, Sea Grant supported research by a faculty member serving on the fishery management council's Scientific and Statistical Committee who provided the foundation for a practical and effective definition of "overfishing" that has enabled the Council to establish fair and effective fishery quotas. This knowledge-based decision making process has been accepted at all levels up to and including the Secretary of Commerce.

In our honest broker role, it was Sea Grant that was asked to by the Council to operate a voluntary pilot domestic observer program to see if this was a practical way to replace the information lost as the observed foreign and joint venture fleets were phased out. Our success led to the current observer program that is supported by the industry both financially and at fishery management council meetings. These are only a few examples of the areas in which Sea Grant has made significant contributions.

For all that Sea Grant does, we believe that this program represents an extraordinary value for the U.S. taxpayer. Repeated analyses have shown that Sea Grant returns far more than the cost of its annual appropriation in cost savings and increased economic growth. Further, the annual federal appropriation of about \$54 million represents only about half of the operating budget of the Sea Grant Program as a whole. Sea Grant consistently exceeds its statutory federal match requirement with contributions from its host universities, state and local governments, and the private sector. Except for special-purpose funding in congressionally-mandated areas such as marine biotechnology, oyster disease research, and aquatic nuisance species, Sea Grant's core program funding has remained essentially flat for more than a decade. We are particularly puzzled, therefore, that the Administration's budget request for fiscal year 1998 proposes to cut Sea Grant's federal funding by more than \$4 million, in areas that have been specified by the Administration as high priorities: promoting healthy coastal ecosystems, rebuilding the Nation's fisheries, and helping to recover protected species. We do not believe that such a cut is warranted by any objective evaluation of Sea Grant's performance, and we urge Congress to evaluate Sea Grant's demonstrated success as it relates to other funding priorities.

Mr. Chairman, the Sea Grant Association strongly supports your bill, H.R. 437, to reauthorize the National Sea Grant College Program, and we are extremely grateful for the very strong bipartisan support that the House Resources Committee has shown for this legislation. H.R. 437 makes important improvements in the internal operation of the Sea Grant Program, clarifies the division of responsibility between the Sea Grant institutions and NOAA, and takes significant steps toward implementing the recommendations of the National Research Council in its recent review of the Sea Grant Program. We look forward to the early enactment of this legislation, and pledge our full cooperation with you and the members of this subcommittee as this excellent bill moves forward.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would be pleased to answer any questions that you and other Members may have, or to provide any additional information you may need on the activities of the National Sea Grant College Program.

SUPPLEMENTAL SHEET

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