

Statement of Christopher G. Mann
Policy Director
Center for SeaChange

Before the
Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans
House Committee on Resources

September 30, 2004



2101 Wilson Blvd. ▪ Ste. 550 ▪ Arlington, VA 22201
Phone: 703.516.0632 ▪ Fax: 703.516.9551
www.seachangecenter.org

Good morning Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee. My name is Chris Mann. I am Policy Director for the Center for SeaChange, a non-profit organization established to reform U.S. ocean policy to protect, maintain and restore the health of marine ecosystems.

As a former member of the staff of this Committee, I am particularly pleased to be here today to present the views of the Center for SeaChange on H.R. 4368. Having worked with you, Mr. Chairman, and Mr. Saxton, over the course of many years, I appreciate the longstanding commitment both of you have shown to conservation and sustainable use of our marine resources. I commend you for holding the hearing today, which I hope is the first of many discussions within this Committee regarding much-needed reforms to the nation's ocean policy.

The U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy found that in 2000 the oceans contributed \$117 billion annually to the U.S. economy and supported more than two million jobs. To put these numbers in perspective, this is 2 ½ times the total economic output and 1 ½ times the employment of the farm sector.

Yet our laws and policies governing the oceans have allowed this incredible resource to be severely degraded. The U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy and the Pew Oceans Commission found our marine ecosystems, and the resources they produce, in an alarming state of decline. To cite a few examples:

- Nearly 2/3 of our estuaries are moderately or severely degraded by nutrient pollution.
- There were more than 18,000 beach closings resulting from water pollution in 2003, a sharp increase in the number of closings over previous years.
- Of the federally managed fish stocks whose status is known, nearly one-third are overfished, are experiencing overfishing, or both.
- The status of more than two-thirds of our fish stocks is unknown.
- Habitat vital for coastal species and for maintaining clean water is being lost at an alarming rate due to unwise and unsustainable development. The United States is losing more than 20,000 acres of coastal wetlands each year. Most of the seagrasses, which once formed vast underwater nurseries in estuaries from Galveston Bay to Chesapeake Bay, have vanished.

Both commissions concluded that dramatic changes in U.S. ocean policy are needed to reverse these declines and preserve the ecological and economic benefits provided by our oceans. Mr. Chairman, this is the context in which H.R. 4368 and several other reform bills before Congress should be evaluated.

If I'm reading correctly between the lines, H.R. 4368 was introduced because of concern that NOAA in its present circumstances is unable to be a good steward of our marine resources. That is a concern I share, but I do not believe that placing NOAA in the Department of the Interior is the appropriate solution.

NOAA is essentially a science and natural resource management agency, yet it is part of the Commerce Department, which is generally responsible for promoting the interests of U.S. business and industry at home and abroad. At about 60 percent of the Commerce Department's budget, NOAA is by far the largest component of that Department.

The United States long-term economic interest is completely compatible—in fact, is dependent upon—healthy oceans. Unfortunately, the perception is that in the Department of Commerce short-term interests may take precedence over the long-term health of the resource. Justified or not, as long as this cloud hangs over NOAA's head, its credibility as a science-based resource management agency will be compromised.

As a result, it makes sense to move NOAA out of Commerce, as was recommended by the Pew Oceans Commission. However, placing NOAA within the Department of Interior is not the right step to take at this time.

The Interior Department certainly has a culture of natural resource management. In the long term, there is validity to the idea of a Department of Natural Resources consolidating all or most such programs of the federal government. This has been tried before without success and I do not see that proposal as politically viable any time soon. Without the substantial changes in policy and structure that would accompany the establishment of a Department of Natural resources, there is a danger that ocean issues would get lost at Interior.

Secondly, while ocean issues can be contentious, they are typically less contentious overall than the Interior Department's resource management portfolio. I would hate to see you move NOAA out of the frying pan and into the fire. Such a step might diminish the chances for bipartisan—and bicameral—agreement on ocean policy reform.

Lastly, moving NOAA to Interior does not address the agency's fundamental problems, which are more the result of inappropriate and ambiguous policies than they are about placement within the organization chart. NOAA is currently charged to implement a confusing and often conflicting array of mandates. For example, the agency is responsible for protecting marine mammals and endangered species, and with promoting and developing fisheries. It is not news to this committee that these dual missions often run afoul of each other.

So what should be done to set U.S. ocean policy on the right track? Specifically, what action could Congress take to ensure that NOAA is empowered to manage our ocean resources for the greatest public benefit? If you put aside all the hype and politics, and read the reports of the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy and the Pew Oceans Commission, you will find that there is a great deal of common ground. It is this common ground that the Center for SeaChange believes provides a strong basis for ocean policy reform. Where do the two commissions agree?

First, we need a comprehensive national ocean policy. Both commissions found that a major cause of ocean degradation was the fragmented, stovepipe nature of federal ocean

law and policy. They agreed the nation's marine resources should be managed on an ecosystem basis.

The Pew Oceans Commission recommended that Congress enact a national oceans policy committing the nation to protect, maintain, and restore the health of our marine ecosystems. Congress has established strong national policies protecting our water, air and public lands. It is now time to establish a national policy for clean, healthy, and productive oceans.

Second, NOAA needs to be strengthened so that it can be the nation's oceans agency. NOAA has taken some positive steps in this regard, but the agency needs a strong mandate from Congress to finish the job. Congress should enact an organic act for NOAA providing the agency with a clear stewardship mission, the internal structure to facilitate regional, ecosystem-based management, and the authority it needs to get the job done.

Third, there must be greater attention to ocean issues at the White House and an effective mechanism for interagency coordination and implementation of ocean policy. More than half of the cabinet departments and a number of independent agencies carry out activities and programs affecting the oceans. Both commissions recommended the President appoint a national oceans advisor and the establishment of a cabinet-level National Oceans Council.

Fourth, we need a forum and a process to better coordinate state and federal ocean policy. The arbitrary lines that separate federal and state jurisdiction over oceans hamper our ability to protect the health of marine ecosystems. Overlaid on this are local and tribal resource use decisions that further complicate comprehensive management. If we can find a way to bridge these gaps, the public interest in healthy oceans will be better served. To address this need, both commissions recommended the establishment of regional ocean ecosystem councils to bring the appropriate players together, identify common concerns and goals, and outline plans of action to protect our oceans.

And last, but not least, we need the resources to get the job done. The U.S. Commission has done an extensive analysis of the cost of implementing its recommendations, and while those costs are significant they are modest compared to the value of healthy oceans to our nation. Both commissions recommended doubling the budget for ocean science. NOAA would have to be given substantially more resources to carry out a new national ocean policy. The Pew Commission suggested that this would require a doubling of the agency's budget as well.

Where would the money come from? Both commissions recommended that Congress establish a dedicated fund to pay for ocean and coastal conservation and management, and consider using revenue derived from offshore oil and gas development to capitalize it. From a public policy standpoint, it makes sense to reinvest revenue from nonrenewable marine resource extraction into renewable marine resource stewardship. I believe this can be done in a way that does not encourage oil and gas development where

it is not desirable. Such safeguards are built into the GO Act and the OCEANS 21 Act, for example.

Mr. Chairman, I know I have outlined a very ambitious agenda. But the response needs to be proportionate to the very serious problems we face in the oceans today. People of intellect and accomplishment came together in good faith on the two ocean commissions, looked at the same set of facts, and reached very similar conclusions about the state of our oceans and what must be done to save them. Now Congress needs to act boldly to follow through.

Again, I commend Congressman Saxton for getting the discussion started with this bill. The Center for SeaChange and the Members of the Pew Oceans Commission certainly share your concern that ocean stewardship—not just at NOAA but government-wide—needs to be improved. We look forward to working with you to accomplish this goal.

Thank you for the opportunity to present the views of the Center for SeaChange, and I'd be happy to answer any questions that you may have.