

Testimony of Captain Michael R. Watson  
President, American Pilots' Association

Before the House Resources Committee  
Subcommittee on Fisheries and Oceans

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APA Views on the Coastal Ocean Observation System Integration Act of 2005 (H.R. 1489)

Good morning Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee. I am Scott Rainey, Deputy Director for the American Pilots' Association. I am here to deliver the views of our President and the members of the APA. Captain Michael Watson asked me to express his regrets that he could not be here today. Thank you for this opportunity to appear before you to testify on H.R. 1489, the Coastal Ocean Observing System Integration and Implementation Act of 2005.

The American Pilots' Association is the national trade association of professional maritime pilots. Its membership is made up of approximately 60 groups of state-licensed pilots, representing virtually all the state pilots in the country, as well as the three groups of United States-registered pilots operating in the Great Lakes. APA members pilot over 95 percent of all ocean-going vessels moving in United States waters.

The APA supports this legislation to authorize the Secretary of Commerce to establish a coastal ocean observing system. We are particularly pleased that this bill focuses on the importance of observations in the coastal waters of the United States and that it specifically identifies observations for marine operations as a core mission of the proposed Coastal Ocean Observing System. As recently noted in the Administration's Ocean Action Plan, our country is increasingly dependent upon waterborne commerce. Accurate, timely and reliable navigation information is the number one safety need of pilots and other professional mariners. Federal investment in operational observing systems that support marine operations will facilitate the safe and efficient movement of our commerce and protect our marine environment. H.R. 1489 recognizes this critical national need.

Mr. Chairman, as you know, the American Pilots' Association has been the leading maritime industry advocate for a national Physical Oceanographic Real Time System (PORTS) program for many years. NOAA's PORTS program provides real-time, quality-controlled tide, current and meteorological information that assist pilots in making critical navigation safety decisions. Recently, NOAA has approved air gap sensors for operational use as an additional critical data set in its PORTS program. Two of the operational air gap sensors are mounted on bridges over the C&D Canal within the Chesapeake Bay PORTS system. There are now thirteen operational PORTS systems in the country.

In each case, these systems were designed to meet stakeholders' specific needs for critical navigation data. Unfortunately, despite the operational success of NOAA's PORTS program – the program's significant benefit to the efficient and safe flow of our nation's waterborne commerce – the lack of sufficient and stable federal funding continues to jeopardize the program. Because of insufficient federal funding, NOAA has been unable to adequately maintain the system. As an example, the two C&D Canal air gap sensors that I mentioned earlier were recently down for over a month.

Congress attempted to remedy this situation through the 2002 Amendments to the Hydrographic Services Improvement Act, directing NOAA to fund the operations and maintenance of the PORTS systems, subject to appropriations. However, because the Administration did not request and Congress did not appropriate the necessary additional dollars, NOAA has continued its policy of requiring local sponsors to fund annual operations and maintenance of existing PORTS systems. The policy is failing. As a result of this policy, the Delaware River PORTS system, which is currently back in operation, was suspended for approximately half a year due to an inability to raise sufficient local funds; other PORTS systems are in similar financial jeopardy today.

On the whole, we believe that the Coastal Ocean Observation System Integration and Implementation Act of 2005 presents a golden opportunity to secure, finally, the future of the beleaguered PORTS program. It can do this with the addition of language specifically requiring the development and implementation of an expanded, fully funded, national PORTS program. As a result, the APA recommends that the Act: (1) direct NOAA to develop a strategic plan for a national PORTS program as a key component of the Coastal Ocean Observation System backbone; (2) direct NOAA to implement and maintain such a program; (3) require the inclusion of the PORTS data set as a priority in the implementation of COOS at the national and regional level; and (4) authorize adequate federal funding for a reliable, stable national PORTS program.