

Committee on Resources, Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife & Oceans

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Witness Statement

Testimony of the Honorable Eileen Claussen
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Before the
Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans
House Committee on Resources
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Good morning Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee. My name is Eileen Claussen. I am President and Chair of the Board of Strategies for the Global Environment, and President of the Pew Center on Global Climate Change. I am also a member of the Pew Oceans Commission, an independent group of American leaders conducting a national dialogue on the policies needed to restore and protect living marine resources in U.S. waters.

The ultimate goal of the Pew Oceans Commission is to make recommendations to Congress and the public on whatever changes to U.S. ocean law and policy are needed to conserve marine biodiversity and to maintain the health and integrity of marine ecosystems. We plan to have a final report to you in the fall of 2002.

To promote a national dialogue, the Commission has been conducting meetings and hearings in coastal communities in every region of the nation. We've heard from local fishermen and business people; local, state, and federal government officials; marine scientists; conservationists; and concerned citizens. Members of the Coastal States Organization who administer coastal zone programs in their workday lives have been valuable partners in making each of our meetings a success.

As you resume work on reauthorization of the Coastal Zone Management Act, it is important that everyone appreciates how valuable this program is. Although its funding level is modest, the Coastal Zone Management Act supports the activities of over 1000 federal and state marine experts who work everyday to reduce conflicts in the use of our coastal resources and to protect the quality of life that draws an ever greater portion of our population to reside in coastal communities.

Hundreds of projects planned and leveraged by CZMA funds have made state, local and private dollars available to assure public access to beaches and the water, to protect our infrastructure investment from natural hazards, to conserve the physical and biological character of marine ecosystems, and to promote sustainable economic use of coastal resources. These are essential governmental functions, Mr. Chairman, needed more now than 30 years ago when CZMA was first enacted. The Resources Committee is to be commended for its careful attention to this program over its long history, reauthorizing the law five times and updating its provisions to anticipate new uses and issues as they came along.

Let me also emphasize the importance of the National Estuarine Research Reserve System. As the Commission has traveled across the country, we have had the opportunity to visit some of the reserves that have been organized under this program. They are national treasures. The Elkhorn Slough, north of Monterey, California is a wetland teeming with vitality in a state where over 90 percent of the original

wetlands have been lost. Commission members counted more than 30 threatened southern sea otters, 1.5 percent of the total population, on a morning kayak trip through Elkhorn Slough.

When the Commission visited Charleston, South Carolina, members visited the ACE Basin, another project involving a diverse set of participants who rightfully take great pride in their wonderful wildlife reserve that provides nesting grounds for endangered turtles. With adequate funding and expanded authority, this system can do even more to protect pristine coastal ecosystems and the endangered marine animals that depend on these habitats. We can testify based on experience to the value of this program and would fully support efforts to expand and enhance this system as proposed in your bills.

In addition to our hearings and focus groups, the Pew Oceans Commission has also arranged for the publication of a series of papers setting forth the best available science on the most serious threats to our marine environment. Mr. Chairman, I would like to thank you for the opportunity you gave us to present the first of these reports, a paper on marine pollution done by a group of scientists led by Dr. Donald Boesch from the University of Maryland and Dr. Richard Burroughs from the University of Rhode Island, when you met with our Chair, Leon Panetta, earlier this year. Our next paper due in late June will be on the subject of aquaculture and will be followed by papers on invasive species, the ecological effects of fishing, and the impacts of coastal development.

What does the best available science say about marine pollution? The principal threat comes from nutrient pollution that over enriches coastal waters causing explosive growth in microscopic organisms that in some places literally chokes the life out of marine ecosystems. The adverse effects are delivered by three mechanisms. First, increased amounts of plankton block sunlight causing a loss of seagrasses that had provided habitat for many larger life forms. Second, when the plankton dies and drifts to the bottom of a marine environment, processes of decomposition may use up available oxygen causing the death or flight of bottom dwelling organisms. And finally, nutrient pollution may promote toxic algal blooms that kill fish and other marine animals outright--and by the millions--and threaten human uses including recreation and fishing in affected areas.

The principal nutrient of concern in coastal waters is nitrogen. Our use of commercial fertilizer and combustion of fossil fuels has had a dramatic effect on the global nitrogen cycle. U.S. coastal ecosystems are receiving one hundred to four hundred percent more nitrogen than natural systems would experience. That is a huge change in a fundamental part of life cycles in these environments. As a result, more than one-third of our estuaries are highly stressed--stressed from eutrophication in ways that inhibit recovery from other human disturbances such as overfishing, physical development, invasive species and climate change.

Nitrogen pollution can travel very long distances in the atmosphere and in watersheds. One-third of the nitrogen impacting the Chesapeake Bay is air pollution from powerplant and vehicle exhaust. Nitrogen oxides emitted to the air may travel 500 to 1000 miles from the source before they are deposited. Ninety percent of the nitrogen pollution that contributes to the "dead zone" in the Gulf of Mexico is discharged to tributaries in the Mississippi and Ohio River watersheds from farms and cities located north of St. Louis, Missouri.

I bring these science facts to your attention because they have an important message for the Coastal Zone Management Act. By any accounting we must admit that the section 6217 program to control nonpoint pollution in coastal states has been slow to develop. After 10 years, only four state programs have been fully approved and it is clear that many coastal states will continue to resist the adoption of enforceable measures over large areas applying to all sources, because the law asks them to do too much with too little assistance from the federal government. The 6217 program as currently administered by EPA and NOAA is simply not an adequate response to threat of nutrient pollution in our coastal waters.

Everyone understands that our nation has failed to make a dent in the nonpoint pollution problem over the past thirty years. Our marine pollution report provides guidance for a new focus and new sense of urgency.

Although the Pew Oceans Commission has yet to adopt recommendations on this subject, the science points in a clear direction. Overenrichment resulting from huge increases in nitrogen loadings threatens life in more than one-third of the nation's estuaries. This nitrogen is released from farm fields, animal feedlots, sewage treatment plants, powerplant stacks, and vehicle tailpipes. It travels long distances. It is time we had a national strategy with a real federal commitment to address this threat. In addition to reauthorizing CZMA, you will also be working on a national energy policy and a farm bill in the coming months. We urge the Congress to use these and other opportunities to focus on nitrogen pollution and to address it as the truly national problem it is.

Mr. Chairman, in closing I would like to commend the provisions in your draft legislation that promote the use of measurable goals and evaluation tools in the national Coastal Zone Management program. There is little doubt that the Coastal Zone Management Act has provided substantial protection to coastal resources in its nearly 30 years of existence. But the CZMA is a product of its time--a process oriented law in which state coastal zone plans were approved on a showing of certain authorities, processes, and mechanisms, with little requirement to show performance.

One thing we have learned as we have studied innovative local and regional efforts to manage coastal resources around the country is that it is imperative to set measurable performance goals. The establishment of clear goals provides a yardstick against which to measure the performance of management measures. It promotes accountability by government managers and allows them to determine which approaches are most effective, and therefore most deserving of scarce resources.

A 1998 study by Oregon Sea Grant assessed the effectiveness of state CZM programs at protecting estuaries and coastal wetlands--two critical types of coastal habitat. This study found that state programs for which adequate outcome data was available were moderately to highly successful at protecting these habitats. However, many programs lacked sufficient data to assess program performance. The study also found that many state programs did not adequately protect nontidal freshwater wetlands. Given the importance of wetlands in protecting water quality, a priority-setting process targeting water quality probably would have acknowledged the need to protect freshwater wetlands and provided additional protection earlier.

Clear goals adopted in an open process with stakeholder involvement and with a commitment to measure progress and make mid-course corrections as needed has been a key ingredient in successful watershed protection programs across the nation. We commend you for bringing these tools to the Coastal Zone Management Act in your bill.

Mr. Chairman, thank you for this opportunity to testify on the work of the Pew Oceans Commission and reauthorization of the Coastal Zone Management Act.

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