

# Committee on Resources

## Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans

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### Statement

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**Statement of the Honorable Sam Farr  
on The Exploration of the Seas Act  
before the Subcommittee on  
Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans**

**October 27, 1999**

Chairman Saxton, Ranking Member Faleomavaega and Members of the Subcommittee, thank-you for holding this hearing and for providing the opportunity for my colleagues and me to discuss with you the policy needs of our ocean community.

Mr. Chairman, it is fitting that we are discussing the ocean today because at the Natural History Museum, the movie *Galapagos* opens to the public. During the filming of this movie about the islands to which Darwin traveled as he formulated his thoughts on the theory of natural selection, 12 species of marine animals were newly discovered. This highlights two of the points I would like to make today. One is that the American public is interested and cares about our marine ecosystems and the other is that the wealth of knowledge constantly emerging from the ocean should be telling us to start taking ocean exploration and conservation more seriously.

Mr. Chairman, most of the water on earth--97%--is in the sea, and because water is vital for life, it is not surprising that about 97 percent of the space where life occurs, the so-called "biosphere" is ocean. We now know that the sea drives climate and weather, regulates and stabilizes the planet's temperature, generates more than 70 percent of the oxygen in the atmosphere, absorbs much of the carbon dioxide that is generated, and otherwise shapes planetary chemistry. You see, the ocean is not merely a resource, it is part of the very fabric of our existence.

Therefore, I am glad to be here to voice my support for Mr. Greenwood's bill, HR 2090, The Exploration of the Seas Act. This bill instructs the Secretary of Commerce to contract with the National Academy of Sciences to establish the Coordinated Oceanography Program Advisory Panel. The panel will report to Congress on the feasibility and social value of an international oceanography program including the identification of countries and organizations likely to participate, a description of the areas of study in which national and international cooperation occurs, and identification of areas in which our knowledge of the oceans is inadequate. Provided the Panel determines a coordinated program would benefit the United States, the Panel would then recommend how such a program could be implemented.

HR 2090 points to the need for a better understanding of the ocean and ocean processes and in this way, during this time of ecological disasters in the ocean, Mr. Greenwood's bill is very timely. Rather than stand by and watch fisheries crash, red tides kill and majestic creatures like the northern right whale go extinct, we need to anticipate and implement long range management plans. However, we do not yet understand the causes or mechanisms of many current ocean crises and we are therefore unable to suggest solutions.

The following are several examples: In Alaska, Steller Sea Lions continue to decline despite decreased interference by the pollock fishery and we don't know why. The Bering Sea ecosystem has somehow changed resulting in the deaths of 10% of the Gray Whale population, but we don't understand what the changes in the ecosystem are that have led to this.

On Long Island Sound, lobster men and women began reporting dead lobsters last month. From 8% to 13% of the lobsters caught in traps are dead or dying, and a total of as many as a million lobsters may have died. Although die-offs have occurred in other years, this appears to be the worst in nearly a decade. Why are the lobster dying? No one knows.

Runoff from Hurricane Floyd has resulted in a 350 square mile dead zone off of Pamlico Sound, North Carolina and no one has any idea what the lasting effects will be. In the Gulf of Mexico, we have a dead zone the size of the state of New Jersey. Some say this is the result of nutrient runoff, but no one really knows. There are not sufficient funds to study this disaster thoroughly.

In the Northeast, the groundfish population declines while the Canadian seal herd population climbs. Is there a relationship? We don't know because the studies haven't been done. In my own district the Pacific Fishery Management Council is about to reduce the catch for my fishermen by 75% because of overfishing. However, there is dispute between the fishers and the scientists on whether or not management decisions are based on data collected from the right fish populations. No one really knows for sure because fishery management studies are underfunded.

In Florida there are 3 toxic, deadly, and unexplainable red tides. Red tides have become much more common in the last decade, but we do not know why nor what causes them.

The list describing our lack of knowledge about the waters that surround our own nation could go on for hours. Part of the problem is that we are not investing enough in learning about our oceans. Currently, our spending on space exploration is eleven times what we spend on the ocean. And our efforts to protect our marine environment through our national marine sanctuary system provides only 0.7% of the funding we give just to our national parks.

Mr. Chairman, it is time for us to extend our land ethic of conservation and environmental awareness to the sea. Therefore, Mr. Greenwood's bill which points to the need for a better understanding of the ocean is a good one. However, I am also here to say to you that this just isn't enough. Yes, we need more information on marine ecosystems, but we also need a structural review of and reform for the governmental bodies that create and implement ocean policy in this country. We need to do the work that would result from passing the Oceans Act I introduced in July, or something like it.

We have not reviewed our ocean policy for 33 years, since the Commission on Marine Science, Engineering and Resources, known as the Stratton Commission, was given the task of examining the nation's stake in the development, use, and preservation of the marine environment, to assess the nation's current and anticipated marine activities; and, on the basis of this information, to formulate a comprehensive, long-term, national

program for marine affairs with the goal of meeting current and future needs in the most efficient manner possible. In January of 1969, the Stratton Commission released its report "Our Nation and the Sea: A Plan for National Action." The report and recommendations of the Commission led to the creation of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, supported the impetus for the enactment of the Coastal Zone Management Act in 1972, and provided the vision and structure for ocean and coastal policy for the past thirty years.

Since this last review of our nation's ocean policy in 1966, the U.S. population has grown from 196.5 million to about 270 million people, over half of whom live within 50 miles of our shores. By the year 2010, this figure will increase to at least 75%, with all of the attendant potential environmental consequences of having so many people concentrated in areas of diverse and fragile ecosystems. Meanwhile, wetlands and other marine habitats are threatened by pollution and human activities. A study of extinction rates of aquatic animals, published in the October 1999 issue of Conservation Biology, reports that aquatic animals are going extinct at a rate five times faster than land species. In addition, ocean and coastal resources once thought inexhaustible are now seriously depleted. In their annual report to Congress, NMFS states that half the U.S. fish populations, whose status is known, are "overfished" species; but even more importantly, the status of overfishing is unknown for the majority (65%) of stocks assessed by NMFS.

Fish crises are expensive. This Congress just appropriated a total of \$30 million to meet the needs of fishers out of work in Alaska and New England and I now struggle to find funds for disaster relief for the fishermen in my district who, on October 1st 1999, were given a total of 24 hours notice that their allowable take was now cut by 75%. Fishing crises like these could be avoided with better data and cooperation among agencies. We need a national ocean policy with effective communication among Federal, State and local governments and the private sector (including the fishing industry). We need to pass the Oceans Act.

Thirty-three years after the Stratton Commission's report, it is of great importance that we thoroughly reassess the state of our nation's coastal and marine resources, programs, and policies, and that we create a new national ocean plan to lead us into the 21st century. For example, whereas 10% of our nation's coral reefs are damaged beyond repair, we have no comprehensive program to protect and monitor our coral reefs. And in the Commerce, Justice, State and the Judiciary (CJSJ) bill passed last week coral reef initiatives were zeroed out. Sally Yozell of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, in a hearing before this subcommittee last week, said it best when she suggested that it is like asking that our National Forests be managed without the use of maps or money. We need comprehensive, long range plans for sound management of our marine resources.

The Oceans Act of 1999 contains provisions similar to the 1966 act. It calls for the creation of a Stratton-type commission, called the Commission on Ocean Policy, to examine ocean and coastal activities and to report its recommendations for a national policy. In developing the report, the Commission would assess federal programs and funding priorities, laws and their effects on ocean policy, infrastructure needs, conflicts among marine users, integration of ocean and coastal activities and technological opportunities. In an era of frugality when it comes to the environment, we need to maximize the effectiveness of our agencies and programs and perfect communication among all the bodies involved with ocean and coastal activities.

Mr. Chairman, sound ocean policy is obviously very important to me and the people of my district. But I think it is important to the entire country. Not only does half our population live on the coast, but 293 (67%) of the Members of the House are from districts with coastline or from within the coastal zone. We are all critically dependent on the oceans and the resources we derive from them. Commercial and recreational fishing provides 1.5 million jobs and an estimated \$111 billion annually to the nation's economy, and more

than thirty percent of the United States GNP is produced in coastal counties. Our oceans and beaches are our leading tourist destination, with 85% of tourist revenues being spent in coastal states. In 1993 more than 180 million Americans visited coastal waters nationwide, and in California alone the revenue generated by tourism is approximately \$38 billion annually. The beautiful coasts and ocean in my district are key to the area's \$1.5 billion travel and tourism industry.

In addition, many discoveries by marine scientists have been reported recently in the New York Times, Discovery Magazine, Science Magazine and other mainstream publications. The findings of our marine researchers are also making the front pages because the American people care and because the findings are the type of practical, applicable discoveries that affect all our lives. For example, in hydrothermal vents scientists are finding microbes with unique genetic codes, the products of which (enzymes), can be used for high temperature industry processes, to break down toxic wastes, or remove waste sulfur generated from almost all mining operations (thereby reducing the formation of acid rain). Just last April, in Science Magazine, researchers reported the discovery, in the sediment below the waters of Namibia's Skeleton Coast, of the largest species of bacteria ever recorded. *Thiomargarita namibiensis* removes hydrogen sulfide from the water which makes it a perfect candidate for introduction to other coastal waters for cleaning up algal blooms that cause fish kills.

With this undeniable need to make a commitment to these places of inestimable wealth and breathtaking mystery, I ask the Members of this subcommittee to pass Mr. Greenwood's bill, The Exploration of the Seas Act, and the Oceans Act of 1999. And Mr. Chairman, I would like to leave you with some words from Dr. Sylvia Earle's recent book *Wild Ocean*: "We carry the sea with us. We weep and sweat and bleed salt, and if we go far enough back down our family tree to the trunk we can understand why there is a feeling of kinship. To me all life in the sea is family."

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