

## **The Ocean and the Congress**

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I believe that in the coming years, we'll look back at 2009 as a turning point for ocean management, conservation and science. It may take some time to get the necessary programs and initiatives online, but I believe a strong foundation is being established.

The year got off to a great start when President Obama, during his inauguration speech, vowed to "restore science to its rightful place." Even better, he quickly followed through on that promise, appointing prominent scientists to lead several key agencies: physicist Stephen Chu at the Department of Energy; ecologist Jane Lubchenco at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and geophysicist Marcia McNutt at the U.S. Geological Survey.

Congress has had some early successes capitalizing on this new mindset. We were able to inject additional funding into basic research and other scientific programs through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. We also passed the Omnibus Public Lands Act, a package that included a number of marine related bills.

Key ocean-related legislation included in the package of bills was the Coastal and Estuarine Land Conservation Program Act; the Federal Ocean Acidification Research and Monitoring Act; the Ocean and Coastal Mapping Integration Act; the Integrated Coastal and Ocean Observation System Act; the NOAA Ocean Exploration and Undersea Research Act; and a bill I introduced, the Ocean Research and Exploration Enhancement Act, which establishes two important ocean research programs: the National Undersea Research Program and the National Ocean Exploration Program

Many other ocean-related bills are receiving attention in both the House and Senate, including measures to restrict illegal fishing and shark finning; protect coral reefs; promote environmental education; and fund research to understand harmful algal blooms. The House has also passed the STEM Education Coordination Act, which would make advances in the coordination of federal programs that support science, technology, engineering and math education.

But as we've seen over the past few months, these individual efforts have been overshadowed by larger debates consuming public opinion and congressional floor time, namely health care and climate change.

But not all the obstacles we've faced this year in our efforts to reform ocean policy have been setbacks. Just as my own reform efforts began to pick up traction in Congress, the White House weighed in by creating a Presidential Ocean Policy Task Force, made up of the heads of several agencies with jurisdiction over ocean issues and headed up by the White House Council on Environmental Quality.

The president asked the task force to recommend a national ocean policy and a strategy for incorporating marine spatial planning into our activities regarding the ocean. He also requested a framework within which to implement both the national ocean policy and the marine spatial planning strategy.

These charges were intended to build on existing recommendations, including reports from the Pew Ocean Commission and the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy. These reports, combined with my own Oceans-21 legislation, provide a fairly comprehensive foundation on which President Obama could develop his own platform.

That these actions were taken at all is a great step forward, but the fact that they were made so early in his White House tenure is a clear signal that President Obama is serious about reforming ocean policy.

By the time this column is printed, the task force should have already issued its final recommendations for public comment. Thirty days later, in early January, the final recommendations are scheduled to be submitted to the president.

Everyone in the ocean policy community is hopeful that President Obama will act quickly to make those recommendations official. But administrative action by itself isn't enough. In Congress, we are working to develop legislation to compliment whatever those executive actions may be. One thing is for sure: there will be components in need of legislative

reinforcement and gaps that can only be addressed by Congress.

I believe Oceans-21, which I have written about here in the past, will fill many of those gaps. As drafted, H.R. 21 accomplishes many of the goals the task force suggested in its interim report. Oceans-21 establishes a national ocean policy, strengthens NOAA and creates both national and regional governance structures, comprising federal and state participants..

So the next steps for comprehensive reform are largely dependent on how the administration applies the recommendations from the task force and how Congress moves to complement the White House.

What I do believe has already become clear is that the political will to enact these changes has reached a saturation point. We have leaders in the White House and federal agencies and the desire in Congress to ensure that the manner in which we treat the ocean promotes its long-term sustainability for future generations.

How we manage the ocean has always been a delicate balancing act. I think it's long past time we readjust that balance and move toward responsible management practices.