

**Testimony of Mr. Robert C. Penney  
before the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy  
August 21, 2002  
Anchorage, Alaska**

## **Introductory Remarks**

The U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy has asked me to identify issues in my area of experience, and to make recommendations on how policies can be developed to resolve these issues. My experience is as an Alaska businessman who has worked closely with governmental processes for the past 51 years to promote stewardship of ocean and coastal resources, and especially the conservation of our fishery resources. My experience as a founder of the Kenai River Sportfishing Association, a conservation and sportsfishing advocacy group, has convinced me that protection of critical habitats is the foundation for proper stewardship of living marine resources. As co-founder of the Ted Stevens Kenai River Classic, I am proud to say sportfishermen through this event have raised more than \$3 million during the last nine years for salmon habitat protection, public education and scientific research. My efforts to insure access of the sportsfishing public to these same resources has also taught me how little we know about the marine and marine-related environments, in spite of the many advances in knowledge in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. As a final note on my experience, my special interest has long been the protection and sustained harvest of salmon, an animal that starts life in freshwater but goes on to gain nearly all of its adult weight in marine waters. Working with salmon has taught me that marine ecosystems do not stop at the shoreline. As the long-term fate of Alaska's coastal watersheds is highly dependent on proper stewardship of coastal and ocean resources, my issues address marine, and marine-related ecosystems that cover both oceans and watersheds.

## **Statement of Issues**

- Alaska must find ways to protect the habitats on which production of living marine resources depend.
- Alaska must address critical needs for long-term biological and physical data on ocean and coastal habitats.

## **Explanation of Issues**

**Alaska must find ways to protect the habitats on which production of living marine resources depend.** Commercial harvests of living marine resources in Alaska date back to the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, and the first extinction of a marine mammal species in Alaska, the Steller sea cow, occurred before 1800. As Alaskans we rightly take pride in our management of living marine resources and the quality of fishery habitats, yet we must recognize that our habitats have been under pressure that has been steadily growing for more than 250 years. Even though salmon and other major fish stocks of the marine environment appear to be generally healthy, and the most prominent species are protected

by proactive state and federal resource management programs, there are troubling signs at the ecosystem level. Since 1970, deep, long-term declines have been noted in some species of marine mammals, birds, and fish. Species in decline in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century in Alaska include the Steller sea lion, prominent seabird species, such as the black-legged kittiwake, and keystone prey species such as the sand lance, a small fish that supports marine birds, mammals, and commercial fish species, have also been seen to decline. The degree to which these changes are the result of human activities, such as habitat degradation and fishing, or the result of natural changes in habitats due to changes in climate and ocean conditions, is intensely debated in fishery management forums.

**Alaska must address critical needs for long-term biological and physical data on ocean and coastal habitats.** As is often the case, the debate in resource management arenas, such as the North Pacific Fishery Management Council of which I am a member, over the causes for decline in prominent seabirds, mammals and forage fish species has so far generated more heat than light. Due to lack of basic scientific information to guide the discussions, fingers have been pointed in all directions. Changes in weather patterns, increasing pollution, epidemic disease and competition from fishing have all been cited as possible factors in the declines. Areas have been closed to fishing to protect Steller sea lions and other species, yet how big these areas need to be to provide the intended protection is unclear due to lack of information. Marine Protected Areas that exclude all economic, and even subsistence, uses have been proposed as perhaps the only effective resource management solution for protection of some species. Again, lack of adequate information makes the locations and sizes of Marine Protected Areas very hard to establish in a regulatory arena. Protecting habitat requires understanding what makes habitat essential, and this understanding requires long-term biological and physical data on ocean and coastal habitats.

## **Recommendation**

There is no single solution to complex problems, but I believe there is a single step that must be taken by the federal government before we can resolve these two issues, or any of the many other issues that face the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy. As the federal government now provides basic observations on weather conditions to the daily benefit of professionals who advise millions of Americans, I believe that the federal government also needs to provide basic observations on ocean conditions to the managers of living marine resources who also serve millions. To go along with the surveys of prominent species of birds, fish and mammals, Alaska, and the nation, need a basic coastal network of routine, systematic observations on physical and biological ocean conditions. Taking this fundamentally important step toward solving the age-old resource management dilemma, “Was it the effect of fishing, or did something change in ocean conditions?” is one of the most important things the Commission can do for Alaska, and for the rest of the nation as well.

Fortunately the federal government is already making progress toward establishing a national backbone of observations on ocean conditions through a multi-agency program known as Ocean.US. By now Ocean.US should be well known to the

Commission. For the benefit of those who may not be familiar with the program, Ocean.US aims to fill the gaps in oceanographic and climatic information for resource management agencies by providing a blueprint for a national backbone of observations from a variety of federally funded platforms, such as moorings, ships and satellite coverages, known collectively as the Integrated and Sustained Ocean Observing System, or IOOS. The Ocean.US blueprint for is due from the National Ocean Research Leadership Committee in December of this year.

I also believe that a national backbone is needed to support the regional programs Alaska already has underway, Gulf of Alaska Ecosystem Monitoring and Research Program, or GEM, and the North Pacific Research Board, or NPRB. GEM pilot projects launched in the late 1990s, such as the continuous ocean monitoring station near Seward known as GAK-1, were among the first in the nation to be identified as forerunners of a marine observing system that would one day blanket the coast of the United States. GEM has been used as a model of a regional system by Ocean.US, and by the closely allied U.S. Steering Committee of the Global Ocean Observing System (GOOS). NPRB has a much wider geographic range than GEM, addressing all marine areas of the state, providing research and monitoring in support of fishery management activities. Both regional programs are tailored to specific needs defined by the circumstances of Alaska, yet both could benefit enormously from a federal infrastructure producing observations on basic ocean conditions.

Thanks for the opportunity to comment, and I wish the Commission success in the important work it is doing for Alaska and the nation.

## **References**

Gulf of Alaska Ecosystem Monitoring and Research Program

<http://www.oilspill.state.ak.us/gem/index.html>

North Pacific Research Board

<http://www.fakr.noaa.gov/nprb/rfp.htm>

Ocean.US

<http://www.ocean.us.net/>

U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy

<http://www.oceancommission.gov/documents/oceanact.html#purpose>

U.S. Steering Committee of the Global Ocean Observing System

<http://www-ocean.tamu.edu/GOOS/usgsc.html>

Kenai River Sportfishing Association

<http://www.kenairiversportfishing.org/>

## **Background**

The Oceans Act 2000 requires the Commission to recommend measures that will promote eight objectives:

- (1) protection of life and property
- (2) stewardship of ocean and coastal resources
- (3) protection of marine environment and prevention of marine pollution
- (4) enhancement of maritime commerce
- (5) expansion of human knowledge of the marine environment
- (6) investments in technologies to promote energy and food security
- (7) close cooperation among government agencies
- (8) U.S. leadership in ocean and coastal activities.

### **Ocean.US**

Ocean.US was created by the National Oceanographic Partnership Program in late 2000 with the mission of making an integrated and sustained ocean observing system (IOOS) operational. NOPP is guided by the National Ocean Research Leadership Committee, NORLC, a cabinet level body that includes DOI. Ocean.US aims to fill the gaps in oceanographic and climatic information for resource management agencies by providing a national backbone of observations from federally funded moorings, ships and satellite coverages.

Under Ocean.US, the IOOS is intended to be a backbone connecting the regional marine observing programs that are becoming established around the coastline of the United States. In the Alaska Region DOI has been instrumental in establishing one such regional marine observing program, the Gulf of Alaska Ecosystem Monitoring and Research Program, GEM. GEM pilot projects launched in the late 1990s were among the first in the nation to be identified as forerunners of a marine observing system that would one day blanket the coast of the United States. GEM has been used as a model of a regional system by Ocean.US, and by the allied U.S. Steering Committee of the Global Ocean Observing System (GOOS).

### **U.S. Steering Committee of the Global Ocean Observing System**

The U.S. GOOS Steering Committee was formed at the request of Dr. D. James Baker, Jr., Under Secretary for Oceans and Atmosphere at NOAA, on behalf of interested Federal agencies. The group was requested to help in the development of information concerning options on how to match the needs of user groups with the observations and products required to meet those needs, addressing what is working well, what is not working well, the impediments we face at present, and the opportunities we face for the future.

### **GEM**

The Gulf of Alaska Ecosystem Monitoring and Research Program, GEM, is based in Anchorage, Alaska. GEM is funded by Exxon Valdez Oil Spill Trustee Council,

EVOS, on which three federal (DOI, NOAA, USDA) and three state (ADEC, ADFG, ADOL) trustees serve. GEM represents a long-term commitment by the trustees to gathering information about both physical and biological components that make up a world-renowned marine ecosystem. What makes GEM unique is that it incorporates interagency cooperation and collaboration, public involvement and accessible, informative data and information on the Gulf of Alaska ecosystem. GEM is an important regional coordination mechanism for federal agencies, as well as for state and non-governmental organizations.

### **NPRB**

The twenty-member Board was created by Congress to recommend marine research off Alaska to the U.S. Secretary of Commerce, who makes final funding decisions. About 75% of the funds for the research approved at the June meeting comes from interest earned by the Environmental Improvement and Restoration Fund (EIRF) established by Congress in 1997. The Board also administers the North Pacific Marine Research Institute at the Alaska SeaLife Center in Seward, Alaska.