



October 29, 2002

Admiral James D. Watkins, Chairman
United States Commission on Ocean Policy
1120 20th Street, NW
Suite 200 North
Washington, DC 20036

Dear Admiral Watkins:

On behalf of the National Estuarine Research Reserve Association (NERRA), we would like to applaud the Commission for their work on improving our nation's coastal zone management programs. Our mission is to support the National Estuarine Research Reserve System (NERRS) that includes twenty-five NOAA supported reserves throughout the nation and Puerto Rico. NERRA works closely with the Coastal States Organization (CSO) and we strongly endorse their recommendations to the Commission.

The NERRS programs provide a foundation supporting coastal research, management, and education at the state, regional and national levels. The over arching goal of the NERRS, as directed by the Coastal Zone Management Act (CZMA), is to address coastal management issues identified as significant through research, education, and outreach programs. In the past ten years, three national programs have been developed by the NERRS that are being implemented throughout the system in pursuit of this goal at the national and state levels. These are as follows:

Coastal Training Program (CTP): This program is designed to deliver the best available science-based information, tools, and techniques to individuals and groups that are making important decisions about resources in coastal watersheds, estuaries, and nearshore waters. Programs take the form of workshops, seminars, distance learning, technology applications, and on-site demonstrations. The CTP is closely linked to and delivered through a partnership with state Coastal Zone Management and Sea Grant programs.

System-Wide Monitoring Program (SWMP): The primary purpose of this program is to develop quantitative measurements of short-term variability and long-term changes in the water quality, biotic diversity, and land cover characteristics of estuarine ecosystems for the purposes of contributing to effective coastal zone management.

Graduate Research Fellowship Program (GRF): This program provides funding to support Master's and Doctoral students interested in conducting coastal management related research. Up to fifty fellowships are awarded annually for research to enhance scientific understanding of the reserve ecosystems, provide information needed by reserve managers and coastal decision makers, and improve public awareness and understanding of estuarine ecosystem health and management.

The development of these three core programs, along with increased Congressional support over the past five years, has greatly enhanced our ability to positively effect coastal management as charged to NERRS through CZMA. NERRA strongly believes these three core programs are key to the System's continued role in coastal management. We encourage the Commission to consider the following eight recommendations aimed at improving the management of our coastal resources and increasing the NERRS capacity to contribute in this important arena.

1. Increase NOAA supported research and monitoring in NERRS: NERRA recommends NOAA leadership better utilize the reserve program to conduct federally supported research and monitoring programs as was envisioned by the CZMA. Often times NOAA develops national research and monitoring initiatives and the NERRS must scramble at the last minute to try to "fit" these programs. The NERRS' connection to local government and their continued interaction with state Coastal Zone Management Programs (CZMP) place them in a unique position to bring NOAA's knowledge and expertise to the states and also to bring the needs of state CZMPs to NOAA leadership.

2. Development of a Coastal/Estuarine Observation System: The development of a coastal observing system must recognize the links between the watershed, estuary, and ocean ecosystems. A coastal monitoring effort needs to be closely tied with state coastal programs addressing issues of importance to coastal managers. This would mean the program would have to balance flexibility and standardization to allow for state and regional applications. Such a program also would require a centralized data management hub or office where all data and reports are stored, accessed, and quality assured. It is also critical that regular data syntheses be undertaken addressing specific state, regional, and national coastal and estuarine issues.

The NERRS' coastal observing system, SWMP, is currently being expanded with all these issues in mind. SWMP, or a similar program modeled after SWMP, could be expanded to other programs thereby increasing the spatial coverage needed to help make watershed links at regional or ecosystem scales. NERRA recognizes this is not an easy task but believes this is necessary for the success of a national ocean observation system.

3. Develop national programs to study ocean and estuarine processes: NOAA monitoring programs often concentrate on identifying patterns in the ocean and atmosphere. It is equally important to develop an understanding of the processes that cause the observed patterns and trends. Process oriented studies go beyond correlations, they address hypotheses centered on specific mechanisms that cause change as a response to some physical and biological forcing. Once we understand the processes responsible for change, we can then develop predictive models to forecast how the environment will respond to physical and biological forces.

A NOAA supported process focused program can be administered through competitive research programs at the NERRS and other coastal programs including graduate research fellowships, post-doctoral research positions, and university competitive research awards.

4. Regularly develop synthesis reports of federally supported research and monitoring: There is a need to synthesize research and monitoring findings of the studies being supported with federal funding. The most common mechanism used to distribute research results is in a list of publications. It is also common for final reports to end up in file draws and on shelves in federal offices with little or no action taken. Coastal managers repeatedly ask for synthesis documents and other products summarizing the findings of these research projects and state they do not have the time to read through long technical science reports.

NERRA recommends the development of synthesis reports being produced by the federal agencies supporting coastal and estuarine science. We propose this can be piloted with the NERRS utilizing synthesis reports that can be developed from the GRF, SWMP, and CICEET (Cooperative Institute for Coastal and Estuarine Environmental Technology) programs and then expanded to other NOAA supported science programs.

5. Develop stronger partnerships between NERRS and CZMP: NERRA recommends strengthening the partnerships between NERRS and Coastal Zone Management Programs through stronger language in the CZMA and by establishing a reserve in every coastal state with an approved Coastal Zone Program. This strong partnership is critical for the success of our core programs (SWMP, CTP, GRF).

6. Take an ecosystem approach to coastal zone management: NERRA recommends taking an ecosystem approach to coastal zone management issues by linking federal and state coastal management programs (e.g., NOAA, U.S. EPA, Fish & Wildlife Service) at the regional level. Coastal management strategies and programs (such as SWMP and CTP) could be developed and/or expanded in regions to focus on coastal management issues shared by all. An ecosystem approach could be supported through a competitive grant program making funds available to states working on regional ecosystem scale planning and projects. Financial awards under such a competitive program could support education, research, stewardship, restoration, and acquisition projects.

7. Elevate NERRS role in coastal land stewardship: NERRA recommends giving NERRS a greater authority to manage lands in the CZMA and to establish NERRS as a key stewardship program for lands acquired under the Coastal and Estuarine Lands Protection Program (CELP).

8. Expand coastal management career opportunities to minorities: NERRA recommends the establishment of a minority fellowship program to bring more minorities into the coastal management arena. This could be administered through a partnership with NERRS, NOAA's Coastal Services Center, and NOAA's Coastal Program Division.

We appreciate the opportunity to share out thoughts in this important effort to improve the management of our nations coast's and coastal resources. If we can be of any further assistance to you as the Commission continues to develop their recommendations, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Sincerely,

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