



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
The Under Secretary of Commerce
for Oceans and Atmosphere
Washington, D.C. 20230

JAN 19 2016

VADM Paul G. Gaffney II, USN (ret)
Chair, Ocean Exploration Advisory Board
1112 Gist Street
Columbia, SC 29201

Dear VADM Gaffney:

Thank you for your letter on behalf of the Ocean Exploration Advisory Board (OEAB) conveying your recommendations for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) Office of Ocean Exploration and Research (OER). As part of NOAA's response, I have asked Dr. Richard Spinrad, NOAA Chief Scientist, to participate in an upcoming OEAB meeting to further discuss the topics you raise. In the meantime, I want to share an initial response to the OEAB's identified near term priorities.

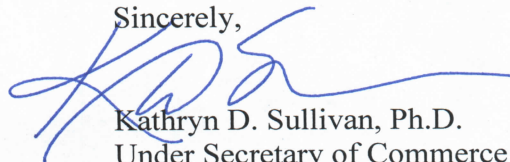
- **FY16 Continuing Resolution and FY17 Budget Proposal:** The FY 2016 Omnibus Appropriation funds OER at \$32 million. Congress expects NOAA to adhere to the report language for both House and Senate appropriation bills. OER's priorities largely are consistent with the report language guidance, and NOAA recognizes the increase will augment and expand on OER's planned activities. NOAA's submission for the FY 2017 President's Budget Request is with the Office of Management and Budget. NOAA anticipates the budget will be finalized and transmitted to Congress no later than February 1, 2016, as required by law.
- **The U.S. Extended Continental Shelf (ECS) Project:** The ECS project is focused on post-mapping analysis, although the *Okeanos Explorer* and other vessels are continuing to collect required data. The ECS project's current schedule calls for the analysis phase to be complete by 2019; the analysis, however, may reveal the need for additional mapping and possible seafloor sampling.
- **NOAA Ship *Okeanos Explorer* Maintenance and Recapitalization:** Half of NOAA vessels are expected to reach the end of their service life by 2028. NOAA's Office of Marine and Aviation Operations (OMAO) is pursuing a multi-part strategy for recapitalizing the current fleet. In addition to preparing the NOAA Fleet Plan (2012), NOAA leads the National Ocean Council's Interagency Working Group on Facilities and Infrastructure, which the Office of Management and Budget has directed to document Federal oceanographic research vessel requirements. The most recent Federal Oceanographic Fleet Status Report (2013) identifies exploration as a use and summarizes the capabilities of the *Okeanos Explorer*, but does not describe the ocean exploration requirement. OMAO established an Independent Review Team to assess fleet recapitalization. These efforts are critical to making the case for NOAA fleet recapitalization based on the current and long-term viability of the fleet, at-sea data collection requirements validated through the NOAA process, and opportunities for technology infusion.



- **Ocean Exploration Trust E/V *Nautilus* Maintenance and Recapitalization:** NOAA will request the Ocean Exploration Trust to describe its requirements and plans for investing in capital upgrades to the *E/V Nautilus*.
- **Development of an Exploration Technology Roadmap:** NOAA believes there are many emerging technologies capable of expanding the pace and scope of ocean exploration, including autonomous platforms, so-called “fly-away” systems, and new sensing and sampling capabilities, all of which can be designed for use on a variety of NOAA and partner vessels. OER is engaged in an ongoing dialogue with the community, including the Deep Submergence Science Community and the Task Force for Ocean Exploration and Research Technology and Infrastructure as well as existing partners (e.g. the Cooperative Institute for Ocean Exploration, Research, and Technology, the Ocean Exploration Trust, and the Global Foundation for Ocean Exploration) to identify requirements, catalogue appropriate technologies, and prepare a plan for developing and deploying new NOAA mission-relevant systems on NOAA and non-NOAA ships.
- **NOAA Ship *Okeanos Explorer* Operating Area:** The *Okeanos Explorer* operates almost exclusively in the U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), over 75 percent of which is outside the contiguous United States. NOAA’s current FY 2016 and FY 2017 plans to deploy the *Okeanos Explorer* are based on NOAA mission priorities within the U.S. EEZ. OMAO is managing the maintenance and operations of the *Okeanos Explorer* according to established guidelines and practices and does not anticipate any difficulties operating in these areas, including the Western Pacific.

I appreciate your guidance and advice and I look forward to learning about the outcomes of the OEAB’s discussions with Dr. Spinrad.

Sincerely,



Kathryn D. Sullivan, Ph.D.
Under Secretary of Commerce
for Oceans and Atmosphere