

Ocean Exploration Advisory Board

A Federal Advisory Committee Act Committee

February 23, 2017


Mr. Benjamin Friedman, JD
Acting NOAA Administrator
Washington, D.C.

Dear Mr. Friedman:

The Ocean Exploration Advisory Board (OEAB) has frequently discussed sea-going needs for NOAA's Ocean Exploration (OE) program, and it was a central issue at the recent National Ocean Exploration Forum. The OEAB has reviewed the NOAA Fleet Plan approved by Dr. Sullivan in October 2016 and NOAA's Independent Review Team on Fleet Recapitalization report and heard briefings from the oil and gas offshore service community and the autonomous vehicle community. We choose not to comment broadly on the NOAA Fleet Plan, and instead to focus on OE sea-going needs. Our comments and recommendations follow:

1. NOAA is the only federal agency with a mission and charter to conduct and coordinate sea-going OE. We are concerned that the NOAA Fleet Plan did not include OE. This is important because the program contributes significantly to our understanding of the oceans and to national security.
 - We recommend that Fleet Plan updates to the Congress specifically include OE sea-going needs.
2. A successful OE program must include adaptable and reliable operational systems able to characterize the ocean from surface to seafloor.
 - OE sea-going opportunities and investments should involve modular ROV fly away systems, modular (or ubiquitous) telepresence systems, and off-board autonomous vehicles/sensors that are not tied to a single ship or class of ships.
 - We recommend that NOAA prioritize a ship's ability to integrate future technology as a primary performance criterion.
 - Any NOAA investments in ships should be guided by careful consideration of the multiple interfaces required (launch and recovery, power, data collection, public engagement, etc.) and the need to continually upgrade ship and mission systems.
3. Based on the briefings we received from the offshore oil and gas service industry, should NOAA decide to acquire a replacement dedicated OE vessel, it should do so in the near term to take advantage of the favorable American market for open deck offshore support vessels. Such vessels cost significantly less than a "new build," are available immediately for procurement or long term charter, and are capable of supporting global ocean exploration and research.
4. Finally, OER should be appropriately budgeted with resources to select the best sea-going platforms for the campaigns it leads. OE, led and supported by NOAA, should search for year-round, globally available vessels of opportunity (e.g., UNOLS and private vessels for charter) that best meet campaign requirements.

Sincerely,



Paul G. Gaffney II
Vice Admiral, U.S. Navy (Ret.)
Chair

Copy to:

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