

Joint Ocean Commission Initiative

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Our Oceans and Coasts: Still In Crisis

Admiral James D. Watkins & Honorable Leon E. Panetta Push for More Rapid Progress on Ocean Policy Reform In New York Region, Nation

New Bipartisan Initiative Calls for Immediate Action at NY State Ocean and Great Lakes Symposium (Monday, Oct. 24 at 9:30 am, Embassy Suites Hotel, 102 North End Ave., NYC)

Washington, DC--- There is a critical need to implement a long-term national strategy to protect, maintain and restore the nation's and New York's oceans, coasts, and lakes while addressing the problems that continue to plague us due to a lack of understanding and appreciation of these key natural resources and their value to our economy.

This message will be the focus of a discussion by Admiral James D. Watkins US Navy(Ret.) and the Honorable Leon E. Panetta, who have joined forces as leaders of the newly formed bipartisan Joint Ocean Commission Initiative, at the New York State Ocean and Great Lakes Symposium hosted by New York Governor George E. Pataki in New York City. One of the primary objectives of the Initiative is to increase pressure on senior officials at all levels of government to move forward more quickly on implementing a comprehensive national ocean policy. Watkins was chairman of the US Commission on Ocean Policy and Panetta served as chairman of the independent Pew Oceans Commission.

A little over a year ago, the Congressionally mandated and Presidentially appointed US Commission on Ocean Policy released its recommendations for the development and implementation of a new national ocean policy. The U.S. Commission's report followed the release of a similar report by the privately funded Pew Oceans Commission.

"Action is needed now -- to implement a national strategy to protect, maintain and restore the nation's and New York's priceless economic and ecological assets -- our oceans and coasts," said Watkins. "We need a more coherent strategy if we hope to predict, avoid, or minimize the challenges facing our oceans and coasts. Our new effort, the Joint Ocean Commission Initiative, will push to accelerate the implementation of and the increase of funding for policies and science that will help protect and enhance the value of the oceans and coasts for the long haul."

"Governor Pataki and the State of New York have done a tremendous job of bringing together all of New York's ocean, coastal, and lakes stakeholders -- users, conservers, managers and regulators - to begin the process of developing a coherent regime for managing New York's oceans, coasts, lakes and their resources," Watkins continued. "This symposium is a good example of how to chart a course for success in managing our oceans and coasts and helps set the stage for broader regional cooperation among the Mid-Atlantic states."

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Page 2 Our Oceans and Coasts: Still In Crisis

“Our oceans, coasts, and their resources are facing more pressure each and everyday. Populations and development along the coasts are rising at a tremendous rate, stretching our resources” said Panetta. “At the same time, over-fishing is depleting the world’s fisheries, red tides are impacting the health of marine species and humans, and coastal waters are being polluted from runoff, putting more pressure on the coasts and their precious resources.”

To address these dangerous trends, both the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy and the Pew Oceans Commission recommended a new approach, based on “ecosystem-based management.” Ecosystem-based management means a system for governing or managing human activities that recognizes and is responsive to the needs of the natural ecosystem, one that considers the links between different living and nonliving components of the land, sea, and atmosphere, including humans.

More than a year after the delivery of both Commissions’ recommendations, Watkins and Panetta acknowledge that there has been some progress toward implementing a comprehensive national ocean policy. Most notable is the President’s establishment of the Secretarial level Committee on Ocean Policy within the Council on Environmental Quality. In addition, more than 50 ocean-related bills have been introduced in Congress ranging from issue-specific legislation -- such as tsunami preparedness -- to comprehensive legislation that addresses a broad suite of ocean and coastal issues.

“While there has been some progress, we need to pick up the pace or we run the risk of incurring greater economic and ecological losses,” said Panetta. “The failure to act expeditiously on these recommendations threatens the economic and ecological health of our oceans, coasts, and Great Lakes, whose resources and services are fundamental contributors to the U.S. economy, national security, and quality of life.”

The primary goal of the Joint Ocean Commission Initiative is to help accelerate the pace of change that can result in meaningful ocean policy reform. The Initiative will realize this goal by tapping into, and working closely with, networks of people involved in local, state, and regional ocean issues, thereby facilitating progress in the regions while building durable support for the Initiative’s national priorities. The Initiative also will pursue movement on select national ocean policy issues based on the Commissions’ core priorities.

The Joint Ocean Commission Initiative is uniquely positioned to accelerate the pace of positive change. The Commissioners involved bring extraordinary expertise, perspective, relationships, and diversity of interest to ocean and coastal policy reform. This foundation can serve as the basis for a greatly expanded understanding of the critical issues facing our oceans and action at regional and national levels to address these problems.

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