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Federal Government Falls Short on Ocean Policy

New Report Card from Ocean Group Applauds State Efforts While Calling for the Federal Government to Address Climate Change, International Leadership and Inadequate Funding

February 27, 2008 (Washington, D.C.) – The Joint Ocean Commission Initiative today released its annual U.S. Ocean Policy Report Card, praising state and regional initiatives while criticizing the lack of significant progress at the federal level to commit adequate funding and affect meaningful ocean policy reform. This year’s report card expands to include global threats associated with climate change and highlights the enduring failure of the United States to accede to the Convention on the Law of the Sea, jeopardizing the nation’s ability to benefit from and conserve ocean resources of economic and ecological importance. While the nation’s overall grade inched up to a C from a C- average in 2006, the report card challenges our nation’s leaders to implement and fund policies that will ensure the long-term health and vitality of our oceans and our coastal communities.

“Because states and regions have done much of the groundwork for ocean and coastal protection on the local level, the building blocks are in place. But they can only go so far without federal collaboration and support,” said the Honorable Leon E. Panetta, co-chair of the Joint Ocean Commission Initiative. “This nation cannot successfully protect the oceans with one hand tied behind our back.”

According to the Joint Ocean Commission Initiative’s U.S. Ocean Policy Report Card, states and regions continue to lead the way, maintaining an A- grade. The report card praises the introduction, passage and implementation of new ocean-related legislation in states such as New Jersey, New York and Massachusetts. There has also been substantial regional progress in the Gulf of Mexico and along the West Coast. To realize the full potential of these improvements and ensure their long-term sustainability, the report card states, the federal government must step up its support of these state and regional efforts.

“We have been waiting for five years for federal policymakers to implement the recommendations of these commissions,” said Admiral James D. Watkins, (U.S. Navy, Ret.) co-chair of the Joint Ocean Commission Initiative. “Time is no longer a luxury. The economic and security concerns alone caused by their failure to act should be enough to warrant great concern and unified action from Congress and the administration.”

Prompted by the role of oceans in climate change, the Joint Ocean Commission Initiative added an entirely new grading category dedicated to the issue. Changes in the frequency and severity of

hurricanes, shifts in Arctic ice cover, and changing ocean currents all demonstrate the direct link between oceans and climate change. As Congress and the administration move forward developing climate change policies, they must address the glaring lack of resources available to understand and predict their impacts on ocean ecosystems and coastal economies.

It is also imperative that the United States join the Law of the Sea Convention, an agreement that would give U.S. leaders a seat at the table in ongoing international negotiations. The United States remains the only Arctic nation and the only industrialized nation that has yet to accede to the treaty, putting our national security and economic interests at risk. While the Convention gained support in 2007 from President Bush and his military and domestic policy advisors, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, as well as numerous industry and environmental leaders, raising this year's International Leadership grade to a C+, the report card states that full Senate ratification is critical. Recent research estimates that Alaska's continental slope extends farther than previously believed, bolstering America's potential rights to the Arctic's vast supply of oil and gas. The continuing efforts by Russia, Canada and Finland to extend their jurisdiction in the Arctic, also an area of significant military and commercial strategic interest, highlight the importance of immediate U.S. participation.

Despite progress on the state and regional level, it is the lack of federal funding that remains the single most significant obstacle to substantive advancements on ocean policy reform, earning Funding a grade of D+. The groundwork has been laid to implement policy reforms, governmental coordination and collaboration, and scientific priorities, but federal funding remains out of reach. The growing tide of disaster stories about the state of our oceans will not be stemmed or reversed without additional funding and support.

The Joint Ocean Commission Initiative notes with sadness the recent loss of a tireless ocean champion. Professor Marc Hershman, a member of the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy, passed away on February 17, 2008. Professor Hershman was a strong advocate for ocean policy reform and was instrumental in the advancement of coastal and ocean policy both in his home state of Washington and on a national level. The Joint Initiative's 2007 U.S. Ocean Policy Report Card is dedicated to Marc, our friend and colleague.

To review the Joint Ocean Commission Initiative's recommendations, as well as the full list of grades in each category of ocean policy reform, please visit www.jointoceancommission.org.

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The Joint Ocean Commission Initiative is a collaborative effort of the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy and Pew Oceans Commission to catalyze ocean policy reform. The Joint Initiative is guided by a ten-member task force, five from each commission, and led by Admiral James D. Watkins (U.S. Navy, Ret.) and the Honorable Leon E. Panetta, chairs of the U.S. Commission and Pew Commission, respectively. The primary goal of the Joint Ocean Commission Initiative is to accelerate the pace of change that results in meaningful ocean policy reform.