

Memorandum

To: The Honorable Sheldon Silver, Speaker of the New York State Assembly

From: The Honorable Leon E. Panetta, Co-Chair, Joint Ocean Commission Initiative



Date: March 23, 2006

RE: New York State Ocean Initiative

It was a pleasure to speak to you yesterday, and I appreciate you taking the time to discuss potential funding for a New York State Ocean Initiative with me. I am forwarding this memorandum to document points that I raised during our discussion.

Thank you for including the new ocean and Great Lakes category as part of this session's budget bill. I chaired the Pew Oceans Commission, where I had a first hand look at the collapse our oceans are experiencing. It is critical that we start to address the serious problems our oceans and Great Lakes face from pollution, loss of productive marine habitat, and overfishing. Our nation relies on the goods and services that healthy oceans, bays, and Great Lakes provide. We must act now to safeguard our ocean heritage, or we will lose it forever.

I now co-chair the Joint Ocean Commission Initiative, which is dedicated to accelerating meaningful ocean policy reforms to help our declining ocean and coastal resources rebound and thrive. Our oceans are a vital economic resource that we can not afford to squander. The Joint Initiative's U.S. Ocean Policy Report Card from earlier this year gave the nation a near-failing D+ on ocean policy reform. That grade is an indication that insufficient effort, funding, and support are being directed toward responsible management, use, and protection of our valuable ocean and coastal resources.

New York's ocean and coastal challenges are similar to those that face the nation as a whole. New York depends on the ocean and coasts for food, recreation, and jobs. But more than 40 percent of New York's important estuary and bay waters are impaired or threatened. Approximately 30 percent of New York's most important commercial and recreational saltwater fish and shellfish are depleted or are being overfished. Great South Bay, once one of the most productive clamming areas on the East Coast, is at 2 percent of its 1976 levels. The Great Lakes, which represent 20 percent of the world's freshwater, are in danger from sewage overflows, loss of important fish habitat, and threats from invasive species.

We must reverse the trend of ocean decline. Fortunately, there is growing interest in taking action at the state level, and it is the work being done in states that will ensure healthy oceans for the next generation. New York has a strong economic and ecological connection to the ocean and a track record of stepping out to lead the nation on important environmental issues. I believe that New York could become a leader for reforms that bring back a vibrant ocean.

I encourage you to allocate as much funding and resources as possible to this new ocean and Great Lakes category. We need more research dollars and more attention brought to the plight our oceans are facing. Please feel free to call on me if I can be of assistance. I can be reached through the Joint Ocean Commission Initiative at 202.354.6444.