



UNIVERSITY-NATIONAL OCEANOGRAPHIC LABORATORY SYSTEM

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June 20, 2003

U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy
1120 20th Street, NW
Suite 200 North
Washington, D.C. 20036

Dear Commissioners:

As the work of the Ocean Commission nears completion I write on behalf of the UNOLS Council to encourage a clear Commission recommendation in favor of renewing the US academic fleet. We believe that academic fleet renewal is a matter of growing concern for the health of ocean science in the US, and this point has been made through testimony at Ocean Commission hearings this past year. The first recommendation of the 2001 NSF report, *Ocean Sciences at the New Millennium*, stated that "Maintaining a modern, well-equipped research fleet is the most basic requirement for a healthy and vigorous research program in the ocean sciences." We in the UNOLS community are optimistic that a timely recommendation by the Commission could help to move this matter forward.

As you know, a sound interagency (NORLC) plan for academic fleet renewal exists - the FOFC Plan of December 2001. It has received broad community review and support. By its own admission it is a conservative plan, a baseline of what should be done. The missing element is a funding and ship acquisition plan that will build the research ships on the schedule proposed in the Plan. Since it must involve agency budgets, the missing acquisition plan is inherently a matter for government action, action that a positive Commission recommendation could spur.

We are aware that concerns have been expressed about the absence of a government-wide coordinated fleet plan that addresses all the various fleet assets for ocean research (e.g. NOAA, Coast Guard). We in UNOLS feel that the FOFC Academic Fleet Renewal Plan provides a template, or starting point, for a larger, coordinated assessment of ocean surveying/research vessels needs in all the federal agencies. We believe it would be quite damaging to the academic fleet, however, to defer implementation of the existing FOFC Academic Fleet Plan while a larger, government-wide fleet assessment might be discussed or pursued. We have found that there is little duplication of effort or mission between the academic research fleet and the other ocean observing/research vessels operated by NOAA, NAVOCEANO, and the Coast Guard. When opportunities for sharing and trading of effort and ship resources have arisen between UNOLS and the federal agencies, we have been able to exploit those opportunities through various interagency and interinstitutional arrangements.

Various remarkable, even revolutionary new technologies for observing the ocean are on the horizon and gaining capability quickly. These new approaches will increase, not decrease, demands for use of academic research vessels, according to reports cited in the FOFC Plan. For these reasons the Plan indeed represents a baseline or minimum for academic fleet renewal, one that should be pursued urgently. Future augmentations, e.g. in respect of new observing techniques, can and should be incorporated into future periodic Plan revisions and updates. The Plan itself calls for such updates on a

five year basis in light of new facts. Meanwhile it is essential that the existing Plan have a budgeted implementation pathway.

The National Science Foundation, Ocean Sciences Division, has indicated that the Regional Class vessels within the Fleet Renewal Plan (approximately \$25-30 M each) may be able to be funded through NSF, and the first Regional Class vessel designs will likely be solicited within the next several months. In contrast, the Ocean Class vessels (approximately \$50-65 M each), key elements in the academic fleet, have no identified funding pathway, although the Navy has expressed a strong interest in having these ships built. We believe that the US ocean sciences research mission will be compromised severely if funds are not appropriated soon for these vessels.

We make such strong statements because we perceive that the consequences of delay could have serious impact on the future of US ocean science. Existing ships become more obsolete every day, with increased costs of maintenance and repair, and decreased effectiveness in support of science. Individual oceanographic institutions, thus far fairly unified in backing the FOFC Plan, are becoming ever more restive as time passes without a credible, funded future path on which to compete for new ships. State-specific congressional action on behalf of particular institutions, always a real-world possibility, becomes a stronger possibility each day. It would take only a handful of institutional ship acquisition actions of this kind to derail the Fleet Renewal Plan, ensuring that the academic fleet of the future would be merely the haphazard sum of isolated political moves, not the result of a unified national effort as represented by the Fleet Plan.

We believe that a renewed academic fleet resulting from a unified national effort will support US ocean science more effectively than a fleet built under the "haphazard sum" approach, and that action is needed now to secure, i.e. fund, that national effort. We believe that a Commission recommendation in this direction could stimulate that action, and we respectfully encourage the Commission to consider such a recommendation.

We are most appreciative of the attention that the Commission has given to this matter in its work to date, and we would be pleased to address any questions or issues that this letter may suggest.

Sincerely,



Timothy J. Cowles
Chair, UNOLS Council