

PRESIDENT'S COMMISSION ON OCEAN POLICY
New Orleans, Louisiana
March 7, 2002

Statement of

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I would like to thank the Commission for the opportunity to address you today. I would also like to thank President Bush for recognizing the importance of better understanding and managing our oceans and for creating this Commission.

Before getting into the issues at hand, let me take a moment and tell you a little bit about myself and the organization I work for, the Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana. This background, though brief, may help provide a context for understanding the issues and recommendations raised in the rest of my statement.

Before proceeding, let me clarify for the record who I am and what the Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana is. Let me begin by telling you what I am not. I am not an engineer or scientist. I am not a resource manager or program administrator for any governmental agency. Nor do I have special knowledge or expertise about how to design or operate projects. I will leave it to others to help you address those aspects of our coastal protection and restoration efforts.

But as the executive director of the Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana, a broad-based nonprofit organization dedicated to the restoration and stewardship of our coast, I do have a few perspectives that may be of help to you. These include perspectives on the scope and history of our state's coastal stewardship efforts to date, the way we are viewed nationally, and the fears, hopes and expectations of many of Louisianians. They come from the breadth of our membership, our years of working to raise awareness about our situation at the federal, state and local levels, and countless hours of meetings with the state and federal agencies charged with implementing our current coastal programs and the communities affected by those programs.

With that behind us let me get down to the business of discussing the state of our nation's ocean policies. Let me begin by saying that I am delighted that the President and this Commission have taken on this challenge. For too long our oceans, estuaries, and fisheries have been treated as boundless bountiful systems that are the province of a

myriad of special interests and agencies to divvy up. As a result we have a poor understanding of these systems and our “management” efforts are geared at balancing short-term stakeholder interests rather than at the sustainable stewardship of these resources. Indeed, it is not hyperbole to say that our present policy is to have no policy but rather to referee stakeholder fights over pieces of our marine resources. This system, which is more driven by politics than policy, is broken and it won’t be fixed by tweaking. The hard but necessary work of stewardship must begin with a sound policy framework rooted in the simple fact that our oceans are sensitive, finite resources that we do not fully understand.

That last point may seem simple but I believe it is essential. Until we affirmatively recognize it the present fragmented utilitarian paradigm will prevail. Please understand that I do not mean this to be taken as a criticism of any particular agency, program of stakeholder group. We are all actors in what has become a tiresome play box and until the script is rewritten we will all continue to play our current rolls. It is my hope that this Commission will “pick up the pen” and craft a new approach to valuing and managing our ocean resources

So where to begin. Let me suggest a more holistic approach to oceans--an approach that does not view fisheries, habitat, estuary health, water quality, and human usage as separate issues but as part of a whole. An approach in which cross-cutting impacts are not relegated to a paragraph in an Environmental Impact Statement prepared to support a decision that has most likely already been made. What would such an approach look like? Consider the following examples.

Fisheries vs Fishing. Today we do not manage fisheries we regulate and allocate fishing rights and practices. Accordingly our fisheries management tends to ignore many habitat issues and the condition of fish stocks that lack a commercial or recreational constituency. That might not matter if so much if benthic communities and forage stocks were not critical to the health of those species we harvest and value but they are. Despite that fact precious little effort is made to understand the ecology of our oceans and keep them sustainable. As long as our fisheries policies are driven by resource allocation or worse yet levels of protein productions, which lies at the heart of many mariculture discussions, our fisheries and oceans will be sustainable only by chance.

Water Quality vs “Pollution”. As things presently stand “pollution” is more of a political term than and ecological or health related term. As much as that legalistic approach has fueled improvements over the past 30 years it can only take us so far. From a policy standpoint I would suggest that the challenge should not be to define and pollutants but to attain good water quality. Had that been the overarching goal it would not have taken so much grass roots agitating to bring issues such as the Gulf’s “Dead Zone” and produced water discharges to the management table

Subsidized Energy Production vs Responsible Energy Production. The central and western Gulf of Mexico is unique among our ocean resources in that those regions play host to virtually all of this nation’s off shore oil and gas activity. The decision to exploit

this region was made decades ago and there is no likelihood of revisiting it. The decisions about how that energy development is pursued are very much a live issue however. At this time I believe that it is undeniable that oil and gas development in the Gulf is being subsidized by unmitigated impacts to the Gulf and its estuaries and barrier shorelines. I know it is frequently said that the we now know how to find, drill for, transport and process oil and gas without negative impacts but I also know what the coast of Louisiana bears witness to. While it may be possible to drill for oil in the deep Gulf with greater safety than was dreamt possible in the past accidents will happen. And all of the oil and gas produced off shore must go somewhere all of the offshore activity must be supported from somewhere. That somewhere in both cases is more often than not the estuarine regions of south Louisiana. As long as off shore oil and gas requires on shore pipelines, storage, and support it will have impacts that can only be viewed as a subsidy to the extent they are not recognized and addressed. If we must have oil and gas activity in the Gulf it should only be done on basis that honestly assesses and addresses the full range of impacts that come with it.

Habitat. This is one of the thorniest issues in the realm of ocean stewardship. It is also the one I have had the most direct experience with. Until very recently virtually no effort was made to assess and manage the various habitats that are essential to ocean health. To be sure there are marine sanctuaries, refuges and the like but such programs, however valuable, miss the mark of keeping our oceans sustainable. Perhaps the most glaring example I can think of to demonstrate how dire this problem is can be found here in coastal Louisiana. It is increasingly well known that coastal Louisiana is facing an induced land loss crisis. To those of us who live here, these vanishing coastal wetlands are the fabric of communities, cultures, economies and natural heritage. But to any with an interest in our oceans this is not just land loss it is the collapse of the greatest estuary complex in the Gulf region. Without these estuaries, the fisheries of the Gulf will cease to exist as we know them. Despite that fact, the loss of vital habitat continues to take a back seat to debates over fishing gear and site specific development and protection. There is something wrong with this picture.

Perhaps the thing that is most wrong in all of this is that it is rarely our official policy makers and trustee agencies that call attention to issues or point to solutions. It is individual scientists and key stakeholders. I don't mean to suggest that I expect state and federal governmental agencies to take on this as an exclusive burden. But I do believe they will continue to miss tricks until the understanding, protection and improvement of these resources becomes understood as their principle job. Surely, it should have been obvious that the Dead Zone was a problem worth understanding better and addressing. Surely the loss of more than one million acres of estuarine habitat in coastal Louisiana should have triggered inquiry and action. Until this Commission can ascertain why they did not I doubt that real progress is possible.

Conclusion: In order to fashion a policy that will improve the health of our oceans and sustainably provide for those persons and communities that depend on them it is essential to understand that the chief barriers to better stewardship are institutional. We do not

lack for dedicated people, curiosity, and energy. What we lack is a framework that focuses on solutions and stewardship. By focusing on expanding our ability to understand our ocean resources (including their associated estuaries) and enhancing our collective ability to respond to their needs we can more assuredly insure that those same resources will sustain us and those who follow us. Again, I am thankful and optimistic that this Commission can get such an effort off to a good start.