

MEMORANDUM

To: MBNMS Sanctuary Advisory Council
From: Deborah Streeter, MBNMS SAC Member at Large
RE: Strengthening our MBNMS staffing by having more GS positions and offering some benefits to other employees.
Date: January 31, 2003

Summary

I strongly recommend that the Sanctuary Advisory Council (SAC) write a letter to Dan Basta, Director of the National Marine Sanctuary Program, urging him to work with the National Ocean Service and the Commerce Department in order to 1) secure and allocate more government employee (GS) positions to the MBNMS so that the Sanctuary can convert some of its current contract employees to GS positions, and 2) increase the funding of the MBNMS to help better support the remaining essential staff who are contract employees by providing them with benefits. I further recommend that we copy the letter to Mr. Jamison Hawkins, Acting Assistant Administrator for the National Ocean Service.

This matter is particularly timely because our Chair, Stephanie Harlan, is going to a national meeting of all SAC chairs February 18-20, 2003, and has already identified staffing issues as one of the main issues she wants to present to the national program. Stephanie could hand deliver our letter to Dan Basta and personally advocate and underscore our concerns.

The SAC has weighed in on this issue in the past. In June 1999 the SAC sent a letter to NOAA highlighting the problems associated with having a high number of contractors staffing the MBNMS office and urging NOAA to convert contracted work to full-time government positions. This effort did result in the allocation of additional GS positions to the Sanctuary.

Background

Of the 30 people currently employed at the Sanctuary, eleven are government, general schedule (GS) employees with full benefits (health insurance, sick leave, workers comp, retirement support, vacation time, etc.) The four SIMoN program staff are actually employees of the Monterey Bay Aquarium (contracted through the Monterey Bay Sanctuary Foundation) and receive the Aquarium's benefit package. Three are employees of the Monterey Bay Sanctuary Foundation and receive some limited benefits through the Foundation, and one other works through a cooperative agreement with MBARI. The other eleven staff are contract employees paid an hourly wage with no benefits of any kind. They are not paid when they are sick, when they take vacations, or when they are injured on the job, nor do they have support to pay their health or retirement costs. These positions include the Water Quality Protection Program Director, the Joint Management Plan Review staff, the MERITO staff, the SAC Coordinator, the Community and Public Relations Coordinator, the Network Manager, and other environmental policy and education staff.

An organization is only as good as its staff. A good organization has a stable and loyal staff. An excellent organization treats its staff fairly and equitably. The Sanctuary is at risk of losing some its fine staff if they are offered more secure positions elsewhere that include benefits. Staff are also expected to work creatively together even though they have extremely differing working conditions and rewards. Many of the staff have taken on an increased workload during the JMPR process.

Sanctuary Superintendent Bill Douros has indicated that there are limitations on new GS positions within the national program. He also has said that contract positions, when offered benefits, typically cost more than a GS position paid the same wage, due to the Federal government's ability to provide benefits at a lower cost than an outside firm.

The program must do better by its staff. This is critical if the program is to meet its responsibility and mandate for managing more than 5300 miles of precious resources.

Recommendation

I recommend we send a letter to Dan Basta, with a copy to the Acting Assistant Administrator of the National Ocean Service, urging action on these staffing concerns. Please see the draft letter below.

DRAFT LETTER

Mr. Dan Basta,
Director, National Marine Sanctuary Program
1305 East-West Highway
Silver Spring, Maryland
20910

Dear Mr. Basta,

At its February 7, 2003 meeting, the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary Advisory Council (SAC) voted to send this letter with me to deliver to you at the national SAC Chairs and Coordinators meeting in Santa Barbara, February 18-20, 2003.

We are very concerned about the lack of government, general schedule (GS) positions available at the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary (MBNMS) and the high number of contractors currently staffing the office. We strongly urge you to move as quickly as possible to: 1) allocate more GS positions to the MBNMS so that the Sanctuary can convert some of its current contract employees to GS positions, and 2) increase the funding of the MBNMS to better support the remaining contract employees by providing them with benefits.

The MBNMS only has eleven GS positions out of a current staff of 30 people to support the important and considerable mission and work of the Sanctuary program. Because GS slots have not been made available the MBNMS has had to seek out other ways of hiring staff, including retaining many contract workers with few or no benefits. These individuals are not paid when they are sick, when they take vacations, or when they are injured on the job, nor do they have support to pay their health or retirement costs. These positions include the Water Quality Protection Program Director, the Joint Management Plan Review staff, the MERITO staff, the SAC Coordinator, the Community and Public Relations Coordinator, the Network Manager, and other environmental policy and education staff. These positions are absolutely essential to the functioning of the office and its programs, yet these staff are not compensated the same as their GS counterparts and afforded no job security. We believe that this puts both them and the program at risk. The Sanctuary is at risk of losing some of its very knowledgeable and experienced staff if they are offered more secure positions elsewhere that include benefits. It also has the potential to undercut morale at a time when the program is engaged in critical issues like the management plan review.

An additional reason to hire staff as GS rather than as contractors with benefits is that GS positions cost the Sanctuary, and the taxpayers, less. Your program must pay a premium when staff are hired with benefits through contracting firms or complex cooperative agreements. Regardless, if you can only hire them as contractors, because allocation of new GS positions is limited, you need to allocate more funds to the site so contractors can be offered benefits.

We feel that this is an issue where the national program can and should be proactive in insuring that field sites like the MBNMS are as strong as they can be and have as strong a staff as possible.

We look forward to your response and action.

Sincerely,

Stephanie Harlan
Chair, Sanctuary Advisory Council

cc: Jamison Hawkins, Acting Assistant Administrator, NOS