

May 1, 2004

Bangor Daily News

Sea Change

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about the recent report by the Bush-appointed U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy is that environmental groups around the country have rallied around it. Since it is rare for such groups to support anything that comes from the Bush administration, this goodwill should not be wasted.

As the commission's lengthy report highlights, the oceans are in trouble - from pollution, over-fishing, coastal development and habitat destruction, to name a few threats - yet few people are worried. We ignore the ocean at our peril. The ocean-related economy in Maine included 43,000 jobs and produced \$1.5 billion in gross state product in 2000, according to a recent analysis by Charles Colgan of the University of Southern Maine. Nationally, commercial fishing exceeds \$28 billion a year in economic value, U.S. ports handle \$700 billion worth of goods each year and the cruise ship industry and its passengers spend \$11 billion a year.

Further, the oceans provide more than 70 percent of the oxygen humans and other organisms need to breathe and sequester much of the carbon dioxide that could otherwise prove harmful to our health and atmosphere. The seas also play an important role in weather patterns and climate change.

Yet, since few people, even those who live in coastal states like Maine, spend much time on the sea, the problems affecting these waters have remained out of public view. One of the best outcomes of the ocean commission report, and one from the privately funded Pew Oceans Commission, which reached many of the same conclusions last year, is to raise public awareness of the value and plight of the country's oceans.

The message to people who do not live on

the coast - whether they live in Lincoln, Maine, or Lincoln, Neb. - is that "what you do up-river is just as important as what I do in York," says Pat White, executive director of the Maine Lobstermen's Association and a member of the Pew Commission. This means that someone dumping waste oil down a sewer drain or spraying fertilizer on a farm field or planting a lawn at the edge of a lake-side house affects the ocean because that is where all runoff ultimately ends up.

Beyond alerting government officials and the public to ocean problems, the president's commission offers 198 recommendations for addressing them. They range from the concrete, such as doubling the nation's investment in ocean research with an emphasis on an ocean observing system that should be modeled on Maine's successful GoMOOS project, to more general policy directions, such as increasing attention to ocean issues through education.

Several recommendations should be acted upon immediately. With regard to fisheries management, the report suggests that decisions about the abundance of fish stocks should be separated from those regarding what fishermen get to catch how many of those fish. This separation is long overdue.

The commission report, which is now the subject of commentary from all U.S. governors and will be presented to the president in a finalized form in July, also calls for the creation of a National Ocean Council within the executive office of the president. This council, which would include all the cabinet secretaries and agency directors with ocean-related responsibilities, should be created.

The Bush administration and Congress have the rare opportunity to put in place solid

recommendations that are supported by a wide spectrum of groups. Enacting many of the suggested changes won't be easy, but now is the time to act.