

The Post and Courier

Critical call for ocean protections

The U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy issued a preliminary report last week, convincingly documenting this warning from its chairman, Adm. James D. Watkins: "Our oceans and coasts are in serious trouble."

And when our oceans and coasts are in serious trouble, so are we.

That's the bad news. The good news, as Charleston Mayor Joseph P. Riley Jr. points out on today's Commentary Page, is the commission's timely, bipartisan call to a broad-based new ocean policy designed to reverse that deterioration.

The 16-member commission, appointed by President Bush, urged that ocean and coastal regulations be streamlined from what Adm. Watkins called "a byzantine patchwork" of federal, state and local agencies. The panel further urged the creation of a National Ocean Council and a coordinated management regime for federal waters, along with a strengthened role for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. The panel also proposed the establishment of an Ocean Policy Trust Fund based on revenue from offshore oil and gas development, and U.S. ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.

The commission's recommendations, including an intensified focus on the growing menace of runoff pollution from increasingly populated coastal regions (including our own), can't be implemented without a long-term commitment from both the public and private sectors.

But as Sen. Ernest F. Hollings, D-S.C., said in a statement released by his office last week,

the alternative to such wide-ranging measures would be further deterioration of our oceans and coasts. Sen. Hollings, who wrote the Oceans Act of 2000 that created the commission, hailed the panel's report as "a good blueprint for action," explaining: "It appropriately places a premium on strengthening our science and research base. It is right to call for a doubling of the annual federal investment in ocean research, considering we spend just 3.5 percent of the federal research budget on ocean science, but our oceans and coastal areas generate over half of the nation's gross domestic product --\$4.5 trillion annually. You're not going to stop the pollution, overfishing, and disappearing wetlands on the cheap."

Nor are we going solve any of those problems without cooperation across party -- and international -- lines. Fortunately, a bipartisan national consensus appears to have emerged on this pressing need, and U.S. leadership can help to rally global support for this mission.

As David Sandalow, a guest scholar at the Brookings Institution who was assistant secretary of state for oceans, environment and science in the Clinton administration, told The New York Times: "This is a Bush-appointed, Republican-leaning commission that's come out with fairly strong recommendations for new funding, for focusing federal efforts, and an encyclopedia of strong new ideas."

Congress should move forward on those ideas. The sooner we provide better protections for our oceans and coasts, the better our chances of success.