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Findings in ocean report demand actions

We have long advocated increased investment in ocean exploration. A massive report issued by a presidential commission last week affirms the need for such investment.

For three years, the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy has been studying how the nation oversees oceans, interviewing hundreds of scientists and visiting coastal areas. Its report says the 4.4 million square miles of ocean territory controlled by the United States is suffering severe degradation from manmade sources, including overfishing and pollution from coastal development and inland agriculture. The commission found a patchwork of federal, state and local agencies reacting to crises without an overall and coordinated plan of action to preserve and protect ocean resources. It calls for creation of a National Ocean Council within the White House and the creation of regional councils for the protection of ecosystems that cross political boundaries.

The commission also recommends the doubling of federal spending on ocean research and the creation of an Ocean Policy Trust Fund to be financed with up to \$4 billion annually from royalties from oil and gas exploration and development.

Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institution in Fort Pierce, an international leader in ocean research, had considerable input on the

commission's report, which was the first federal study of the oceans in 35 years, and could be expected to play a significant role if the commission's recommendations are implemented.

Harbor Branch, for example, could provide considerable scientific expertise to regional councils in helping them to set their agendas. Additionally, Harbor Branch could be expected to receive increased federal funding to pursue research activities.

President Bush has proposed a manned mission to Mars as part of the nation's continuing exploration of space. The proposal has yet to generate much enthusiasm. It would seem much more cost-effective and rewarding to begin spending more on ocean research instead. Was there ever life on Mars? Probably at one time. But, we know from experience that there are life forms within our oceans that have yet to be discovered and which may hold keys to medical drugs and energy sources that could greatly enhance life on Earth. Yet, 95 percent of the world's oceans have yet to be explored.

We are encouraged by the commission's report and are hopeful that the president and Congress will make its recommendations a major priority before the oceans pass the point of no return and we lose not only the benefits we now depend on, but the potential benefits we have yet to find.