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MILWAUKEE JOURNAL SENTINEL

The virtues of healthy seas

The fate of the oceans is in your hands. First, because your tastes and demands drive the industries - from fishing to real estate - that use up the oceans' natural resources. Second, because only you can make Congress and the administration sit up and pay attention to what's happening in the seas that lap at America's shores.

Between now and May 21, the public has a unique chance to voice its views on changes being proposed for the nation's ocean policies. Failure to take that opportunity could well mean the proposals will end up buried and forgotten in government's graveyard for sound public policy.

The U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy - appointed in 2000 - issued a preliminary report last week on the nation's ocean policies. The commission noted the vital role oceans play in the U.S. economy and Americans' love of the oceans' "beauty and majesty." It also noted that "unfortunately, we are starting to love our oceans to death."

The first review of ocean policy in 35 years, the report talks about the damage caused by exploitation of fish stocks and depletion of other marine resources, by the loss of habitat to oceanfront development and by water pollution.

The commission's recommendations include creating a National Ocean Council, chaired by an assistant to the president, to better coordinate programs and policies; doubling the nation's investment in ocean research from 3.5% of federal research dollars to the 7% it was 25 years ago; establishing an Ocean Policy Trust Fund; increasing ocean education for students; and creating a coordinated management program for federal

waters. Many of the recommendations are similar to proposals made in a 10-year Pew Oceans Commission study released last year.

The recommendations deserve a full national debate. Aside from the notion that keeping the oceans healthy is a necessary and good thing to do for its own sake, there are some serious economic issues at stake as well. According to the report, U.S. ports handle more than \$700 billion in goods annually. The commercial fishing industry's value exceeds \$28 billion a year, and recreational saltwater fishing is valued at \$20 billion. The cruise industry accounts for \$11 billion in spending, and the offshore oil and gas industry's annual production is valued at \$25 billion to \$40 billion. Deteriorating marine resources will have a negative impact on all of the above.

But some suspect that with a war on and an election to win, the administration may not give oceans policy the attention and priority it deserves. That's where the public comes in. A commentary period on the preliminary report will run through May 21.

If the public sends the message to Washington that a reformed national oceans policy matters, Washington - always sensitive to the concerns of citizens in an election year - actually may do something. But if the public doesn't care, neither will Washington.

To help determine the fate that is in your hands, send an e-mail to: comments@oceancommission.gov; or a letter to Public Comment on Preliminary Report, U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy, 1120 20th St. NW, Suite 200 North, Washington, DC, 20036; or a fax to (202) 418-3475.