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Troubled waters

Failing oceans need major rescue effort

To someone standing on San Diego County's beaches gazing out over the Pacific, the ocean may look the same as it always has. But it's not the same. The ocean is in trouble, according to many scientific sources, including a federal commission authorized by Congress and appointed by President Bush. Beneath the surface, the health of our oceans is failing rapidly.

The evidence is unambiguous; federal and state officials must act. That the report by the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy was released around Earth Day suggests a philosophic shift that's necessary to protect the planet. We need a holistic approach to protecting ocean resources. We can no longer separate the regulation (or lack of regulation) about matters such as over-fishing, urban runoff, agricultural runoff, coastal development and the destruction of coastal wetlands. These and other human activities are producing devastating effects on the health of ocean waters.

"Everyone agrees the oceans are in trouble... If we don't get moving now, in 10 years we may not be able to recover." So said James Watkins, the commission chairman and retired Navy admiral who was U.S. energy secretary during the presidency of the first George Bush. The report recommends that the White House set up a National Ocean Council to serve as the centralized command for the 20 federal agencies that currently enforce 140 different laws related to U.S. waters.

The report recommends consolidating overlapping programs and greatly improving

the coordination among federal, state and local policies on coastal issues. It says the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) should be strengthened. Policies and enforcement need to be much more science-based. For example, the eight regional fishery management councils are dominated by fishing industry representatives. The report says this system should be abandoned in favor of scientific oversight of fisheries. The management of fishing in order to save certain fish populations from collapse should be handled by the scientific community, not fishing industries.

And the report called for the coordination of environmental and conservation policies on land with ocean protection measures. The runoff of organic and chemical agricultural pollution from farms in Iowa and Illinois is helping to create an ever-growing dead zone on the floor of the Gulf of Mexico, spreading from the mouth of the Mississippi River. Expanding housing development is creating urban runoff that impacts the ocean in virtually every coastal state.

One thing the report did not do was recommend global changes in ocean policy, although the problems caused in the United States are replicated in every coastal developing country around the globe. Commissioner William Ruckelshaus, the first director of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, rightly said the United States can have much more influence on other nations after it gets its own house in order.