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The Oceans are Dying

THE PRELIMINARY report of the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy, released last week, is a sobering read -- or perhaps we should say another sobering read. It is the second major report in the past year to detail the dire state of America's coastal waters. Last summer, the Pew Oceans Commission starkly warned that the oceans as we know them will not survive without dramatic policy changes making a commitment to preserve oceanic biodiversity. The more recent report, required by Congress in 2000, strongly reinforces the main themes of the earlier one. The United States, the commission warns, is "starting to love our oceans to death"; "major changes are needed" and "reform needs to start now, while it is still possible to reverse distressing declines . . . and sustain the oceans and their valuable assets for future generations."

The report contains a variety of thoughtful recommendations. Currently, federal authority over oceans is dispersed throughout different agencies around the government. The commission would centralize ocean policymaking in a National Ocean Council in the White House and make these authorities less redundant and more coordinated. Like the Pew report, the commission insists that oceans must be managed as entire ecosystems, not as a

collection of geographically distinct environmental issues or threats to individual species. It would significantly increase federal spending on ocean science and education. And to pay for its changes -- which would ultimately cost an estimated \$3.2 billion per year -- it would create an Ocean Policy Trust Fund with revenue from oil and gas royalties.

The report has been criticized by some environmental activists for not going far enough or proposing what the advocacy group Oceana terms "strong, detailed solutions." Indeed, the report seems more focused on broad governance questions than the details of what regulatory schemes should be adopted. But this focus seems, at this stage, constructive. Dramatic policy actions needed to reverse oceanic degradation will generate enormous controversy. Substantial changes in fisheries management, land use, development and pollution in waterways even far inland will certainly be necessary. An essential step in making any of these changes politically possible is documenting the extent of the crisis and positioning government to respond.

Two comprehensive studies have concluded that immediate action is necessary if the oceans are to avoid irreparable damage. The question now is whether Congress and the Bush administration care enough to respond.