

Earth Day, National System of Marine Protected Areas

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As Delivered

- Thank you Joe! Good morning. I'm very pleased to be here to celebrate Earth Day with all of you. You have undoubtedly heard the suggestion that Planet Earth should really be called Planet Ocean, since over 70 percent of the earth's surface is ocean. So it's fitting that we celebrate Earth Day by marking this historic commitment that the United States has taken to protect our ocean resources.
- I'm especially pleased to be here with the Marine Protected Areas Federal Advisory Committee and all of you today, including your Chair, my long term colleague at Oregon State University, Dr. Mark Hixon, to talk about marine protected areas. As a scientist, I've been interested for many years in questions about how MPAs can be used as a management tool to help protect ecosystems, conserve species, and protect and restore important fisheries.
- We're here today to celebrate a major step in our national marine conservation efforts – the creation of a national system of MPAs. Today, an

initial suite of 225 MPAs, from 17 federal, state and territorial MPA programs, join together as charter members of the new, and long-awaited, national system of MPAs.

- Over a decade ago, a group of leading scientists recognized the importance of marine protected areas as a management tool to help protect ocean ecosystems and restore marine fisheries. They also noted the fragmentation of the nation's marine conservation efforts, and recommended that a national system of MPAs be established to provide a coordinated framework for place-based stewardship and planning.
- That call to action led to the development of Executive Order 13158 on marine protected areas. Signed by President Clinton in the year 2000, and later endorsed by the Bush Administration, this Executive Order called for the establishment of a comprehensive, science-based national system of MPAs. After a long term, transparent and inclusive process, we are now welcoming the charter members of that system.
- MPAs are a critically important tools for managing our coastal and ocean resources. The United States has over 1,700 MPAs, established by federal,

state, territorial and local governments to protect ecosystems, conserve cultural resources, and sustain fisheries.

- However, until now, one key component has been missing – an organized system that helps MPAs and MPA programs across all levels of government to work together to leverage their capacities and increase their individual and collective conservation impacts. The national system of MPAs that we are celebrating today will:
 - Provide common national and regional conservation goals and objectives to focus our efforts and finite resources on the most important threats to ocean health;
 - Recognize and highlight MPAs across the country for their contribution to conserving our nation’s natural and cultural heritage;
 - Connect MPAs that are facing common issues and challenges and support them as they work together to find solutions beyond their individual boundaries;
 - Preserve the nation’s most important ecosystems, habitats and resources by working with partners in each region to identify important places that still need enhanced protection; and

- Sustain the services and values that healthy marine ecosystems provide to coastal communities and regions, including commercial and recreational fishing, tourism, education and research and other ocean industries.
- The national system of MPAs is a cooperative effort between the Departments of Interior and Commerce. Equally important, we could not have reached this important milestone without the active and substantive engagement of coastal states and territories, tribes, fishery management councils, other federal agencies, and stakeholder groups.
- I would particularly like to thank the past and present members of the MPA Federal Advisory Committee for their creative thinking and sound advice about developing the national system that they have provided over the past six years. This group is made up of representatives of natural and social science, state and tribal resource managers, commercial and recreational fishing, ocean-dependent industry, conservation organizations and others. At every major step, this Committee has worked with us to ensure that the national system will be transparent, science-based, and focused on national and regional conservation priorities. Your willingness to

transcend sectoral interests to craft a shared vision for the nation's ocean is proof of the importance of this challenge.

- I know that our other speakers today have much to add about their contributions to our shared marine conservation efforts, but let me say a few words about MPAs that NOAA is proud to manage:
 - NOAA's 13 national marine sanctuaries are the first MPA program to have 100% of its sites participating in the national system. These diverse areas provide protection to diverse habitats and cultural resources, as well as opportunities for a wide range of uses, including fishing, diving, and whale watching.
 - The Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument, one of the largest MPAs in the world, is jointly managed by NOAA's Sanctuaries Program, the US Fish and Wildlife Service, and the State of Hawaii. The extensive coral reefs found in Papahānaumokuākea are home to over 7,000 marine species, one quarter of which are found only in the Hawaiian Archipelago.
 - NOAA partners with states to manage 27 national estuarine research reserves as living laboratories for research and education. Four of

- Finally, NOAA manages the nation's fisheries in partnership with the Regional Fishery Management Councils. MPAs are one of many tools used to protect deep sea coral, to protect habitat areas of particular concern, to help end overfishing, and to reduce interactions with protected species. Overall, 67% of the United States EEZ has already been designated by Councils as areas closed to gear that impacts the bottom of the ocean in order to protect sensitive habitats and help rebuild fisheries. We look forward to working with the Councils to recognize their conservation efforts through the national system
- Our steps toward improved stewardship of our nation's ocean resources also demonstrate our nation's global leadership. The World Summit on Sustainable Development, the World Parks Congress, the Convention on biological Diversity, and the G8 Group of Nations have all called for the establishment of a global system of marine protected areas by 2012.

Today's action is an important step toward meeting this goal.
- Today's announcement of the national system marks a major milestone on our collective journey toward healthy oceans. The purpose of the national

system is to provide a mechanism to establish partnerships and take collective action on shared ocean conservation priorities. Each year, a new nomination process will be held, and new MPAs will join the national system. Over time, the national system will represent the diversity of all our nation's ecosystems and cultural resources, and will greatly strengthen our protection efforts.

- We face many challenges in conserving our marine resources. Our seas are becoming increasingly busy places, with competing demands for access and use by the oil and gas industry, wind industry and other alternative energy industries, recreational and commercial fishing, aquaculture, navigation, and other uses. A comprehensive approach to marine spatial planning that looks beyond individual sectors, is needed to address this growing demand. As the broader marine planning process develops, the national system of MPAs will help us ensure that the protection of our natural and cultural resources remains an important foundation of this mosaic of ocean uses and management approaches.
- Perhaps the most significant of these challenges is climate change, which is already leading to impacts such as increased sea level, loss of coastal habitats, shifts in species distribution, coral bleaching, and ocean

acidification. Addressing these difficult, complex problems will require pooling our knowledge, strengthening our capacity for marine and coastal management, engaging the public as stewards of the ocean, coasts and Great Lakes, and bolstering our resolve to ensure that these most important ocean places persist through the coming changes. The national system is a critical tool to help us achieve these key tasks.

- In closing, let me say that it has been a pleasure to be with you on this Earth Day to celebrate completion of an historic and profoundly significant step in the nation's stewardship of our oceans. I look forward to our working together over the next several years to continue our search for better ways to address the challenges we all face.