



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
The Under Secretary of Commerce
for Oceans and Atmosphere
Washington, D.C. 20230

SEP - 1 2009

Mr. Richard Steiner
University of Alaska Marine Advisory Program
2221 E. Northern Lights Blvd.
Anchorage, AK 99508

Dear Mr. Steiner:

Thank you for your letter regarding an evaluation of Unimak Pass and Bering Strait for possible designation as national marine sanctuaries. Your detailed characterization of these two areas, the resources they contain, and the threats they face provide a compelling justification for their protection.

Unfortunately, Section 304(f) of the National Marine Sanctuaries Act (NMSA) severely limits the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) ability to evaluate new areas of the ocean and Great Lakes for protection as sanctuaries until such time as NOAA can assure Congress that existing sanctuary management plans are fully implemented with existing resources. National marine sanctuary designations are extensive stakeholder processes which include a consideration of the fiscal resources required for proper management. This provision of the NMSA has largely prevented these processes from taking place.

Given this restriction and the need to use available resources to implement existing sanctuaries for NOAA's Office of National Marine Sanctuaries, we do not have plans to initiate an assessment of these sites for designation in the immediate future. NOAA will, however, take your recommendation under advisement, and consider conducting such an assessment as soon as circumstances allow. My hope is that assessment of the Unimak Pass and Bering Strait would be conducted as part of a comprehensive review of our Nation's marine waters, including a review of the need for additional protected areas, as you suggest in your letter.

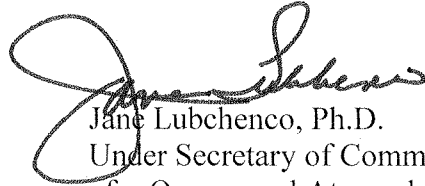
To address other points in your letter, I have identified the Arctic as a priority for NOAA, and will continue to work to strengthen our science and service in this region. No single region better exemplifies the complex interdependence of communities and changing ecosystem conditions than the Arctic. As you have articulated, this region is faced with increasing ship traffic and is at risk for a large, devastating oil spill. NOAA is proactively looking at plausible spill scenarios for the Arctic, and is partnering with the U.S. Arctic Research Commission and the U.S. Coast Guard to define these scenarios. In addition, NOAA is working to identify data gaps and research needs in order to improve our scientific and service capabilities needed to support safety and security needs for fishing, marine mammal protection, transportation, energy, infrastructure, and mineral exploration.

THE ADMINISTRATOR



I appreciate your support for NOAA's national marine sanctuaries. Your input will be very useful as we move forward with developing a new National Ocean Policy as President Obama has directed.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jane Lubchenco". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and "L".

Jane Lubchenco, Ph.D.
Under Secretary of Commerce
for Oceans and Atmosphere