

February 9, 2009

Dr. Jane Lubchenco
Under Secretary of Commerce for Oceans and Atmosphere
and NOAA Administrator – Designate
Herbert Clark Hoover Building
14th Street & Constitution Avenue, NW
Washington DC 20230

Dear Dr. Lubchenco:

On behalf of Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER), I am writing to protest actions by top National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration officials to punish a marine scientist for his “advocacy” on behalf of marine conservation by eliminating any further NOAA Sea Grant funding for the scientist’s work.

Professor Rick Steiner, a noted marine scientist and environmentalist with the University of Alaska Marine Advisory Program, apparently incurred the wrath of NOAA Sea Grant officials by protesting a pro-industry slant in Sea Grant programs to promote oil drilling in Alaska’s Bristol Bay. Shortly after Steiner’s March 18, 2008 protest letter, his dean was approached by National Sea Grant Deputy Director Jim Murray, who according to an e-mail from Dean Denis Wiesenburg recounting the conversation, indicated that NOAA had “an issue with Rick Steiner” because “he was acting as an advocate and asked if he was being paid with Sea Grant funds”, adding that “one agent can cause problems nationally”.

As the basis for urging that Prof. Steiner “not be paid with Sea Grant funds” NOAA’s Murray cited manual guidance that Sea Grant extension agents should strive to be “neutral brokers of information”. Ironically, Prof. Steiner, a tenured professor, had been publicly protesting that the Sea Grant program was violating its own principle of neutrality by stacking a program to favor offshore oil development and improperly minimizing potential resource damage to Bristol Bay fisheries and marine life.

We believe that the actions by Sea Grant officials against Prof. Steiner are both hypocritical and deplorable. We would ask that, once you are confirmed, that you repudiate these actions and work to refocus the Sea Grant program toward promoting ocean protection rather than promoting industry development ventures.

We are also hopeful that once you are confirmed that you will transform NOAA to attend to the urgent ocean crisis – habitat degradation, over-fishing, pollution, acidification,

climate change. Part of needed change at NOAA includes a new strong mandate that **sustainable seas and coasts** should not be sacrificed for more commercial exploitation. Every single policy or action developed in the new NOAA needs to be rooted in the objective that it enhances the sustainability of our seas and coasts.

In 2008, as university professors, both you and Professor Steiner signed onto a *Scientific Consensus Statement on Ecosystems and People of the Pacific Ocean*, which concludes as follows:

“We must act now. The best science indicates that over the next century we can expect to see dramatic declines in the health of the Pacific Ocean, its ecosystems, and the people that rely on this shared resource, unless concerted and prompt action to address known threats is taken. Identifying common problems, uncovering their underlying causes, and addressing them now may allow the Pacific nations to enter the next century as world leaders in the creation of vibrant, intact and highly functioning economically and ecologically sustainable communities.” [Emphasis in original]

We would trust that you bring that same spirit to all NOAA programs, including Sea Grant. Moreover, all NOAA agencies, including Sea Grant, should provide scientists the freedom to seek and teach the truth, without fear and without favor. Nor should NOAA encourage or participate in *de facto* gag orders, as the agency has done with Prof. Steiner.

The ideas of NOAA scientists and those supported by NOAA (university faculty, etc.) should stand or fall in the domain of peer review and public scrutiny, not die in the dark desk drawer of an ideological administrator.

Our present crisis in our nation’s marine and coastal ecosystems requires a clear and urgent national response. In working with industry, commercial fishing, oil and gas, aquaculture, cruise ships, marine biotechnology, etc., all NOAA programs, including Sea Grant should place marine conservation as the primary value.

NOAA cannot afford to squander its time in trying to kill the messengers.

Sincerely,

Jeff Ruch
Executive Director