



**UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE**  
**National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration**  
Silver Spring, MD 20910  
OFFICE OF OCEANIC AND ATMOSPHERIC RESEARCH

MAY 22 2009

Mr. Jeff Ruch  
Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility  
200 P Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20036

Dear Mr. Ruch:

Thank you for your letter to Dr. Jane Lubchencho, Under Secretary for Oceans and Atmosphere at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), regarding NOAA's National Sea Grant College Program. Your letter was referred the office of Oceanic and Atmospheric Research for a response. You expressed concerns that NOAA's National Sea Grant College Program is taking actions designed to favor the oil and gas industry, that NOAA needs to shift agency and program emphasis from commerce to conservation, and you raised questions about scientific openness and communication. I appreciate this opportunity to respond to your concerns.

For the past 40 years, Sea Grant has played a central role in engaging our Nation's universities in addressing coastal and ocean resource issues. It has been successful largely because of its ability to deliver high-quality, relevant science to the public and to coastal decision-makers in a way that maintains an even-handed, unbiased approach.

Sea Grant extension agents and specialists play a critical role in the delivery of that information. Their job is to educate stakeholders so that they can better make informed decisions regarding coastal and ocean resource issues. The ability to provide relevant information while avoiding the appearance of advocating for any particular position is key to their success. When extension personnel fail to take a neutral approach to controversial issues, they jeopardize their ability to work effectively with all sectors. The Sea Grant handbook, *Fundamentals of a Sea Grant Extension Program* (2000), discusses the pitfalls of advocacy stating that, "as neutral providers of science-based information to decision-makers, we do not suggest what those decisions should be. We help them understand their choices and the implications of those choices. We do not take positions on issues of public debate."

In regard to your concerns, the issue is "advocacy," not the position taken. It would be equally objectionable for a Sea Grant extension agent to advocate *for* an activity as it would be to advocate *against* it. NOAA's National Sea Grant Office oversees the state Sea Grant programs and acted appropriately in raising the issue of a Sea Grant extension agent's performance. The ultimate decision of whether to continue a Sea Grant extension agent's affiliation with Sea Grant lies with the employing university.

I would also like to address the larger issue you raise, of openness and transparency within NOAA science. Let me state, in the strongest terms possible, that NOAA is committed to providing the highest quality science and information to the Nation. We do not suppress science; we do not "gag" scientists. We have made our policy clear to our researchers and managers and



are proud of the credibility afforded our scientists in their contributions to the many controversial issues NOAA faces.

Finally, while I share your concerns regarding marine conservation, NOAA's mission is necessarily much broader: *To understand and predict changes in Earth's environment and conserve and manage coastal and marine resources to meet our nation's economic, social, and environmental needs.* I am committed to guiding NOAA to fulfill all aspects of its mission, helping our Nation recharge its economy while protecting our ocean resources, and moving us toward true sustainability.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "R. Spinrad", written in a cursive style.

Richard W. Spinrad, Ph.D. CMarSci.  
Assistant Administrator