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CAMPAIGN 2004 II

Ocean groups seek to influence elections, galvanize constituency

Andrew Freedman, *Greenwire* reporter

Ocean advocates for the first time are joining other issue groups with the formation of a political action committee to help elect candidates who support their causes. The formation of the bipartisan PAC Ocean Champions and an associated "527 group" signals a shift in the tactics of ocean stakeholders from a more policy-oriented approach to the establishment of a broad public constituency to push for ocean policy reforms.

Ocean policy has never been at the forefront of the environmental movement, sometimes being referred to as a "sub-environmental issue." But reports this year from the Pew Oceans Commission and the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy have given established nonprofits such as the Ocean Conservancy and Oceana an opening to raise the profile of their issues.

The U.S. Commission broadly concluded that the oceans are unhealthy, underexplored and poorly managed. It called for streamlining the currently fragmented system of federal oversight by consolidating much of ocean management authority within the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the parent agency of the National Marine Fisheries Service and National Ocean Service.

In response to the reports and other concerns, there are now at least a half-dozen oceans and fisheries bills pending before Congress, but it is unclear what action if any will be taken before the presidential election. On Capitol Hill, oceans policy is often viewed a parochial issue, with members defending their state's fishing industries against proposed environmental restrictions or protecting their district's coastlines from offshore oil and gas development. Transforming that mentality into one that looks at oceans as broad ecosystems is likely to take years to accomplish.

Jack Stern, president of Ocean Champions, believes the path to the next generation of ocean policies depends on groups who are willing to be proactive and fully engage in the political process. Ocean Champions and its associated Ocean Champions Voter Fund, a 527 group, has been set up to make direct campaign contributions and independent expenditures on behalf of oceans-conscious candidates.

"If you're not willing to play the game, there's just a limit to how much politicians will give you," Stern said.

Stern co-wrote a report in 2003 that outlined a new strategy for oceans advocates to take advantage of the commissions and sudden legislative interest. It said despite gains in influence during the past two decades, ocean conservation groups "lack the political power" to achieve reforms. Stern and his co-authors said the fact there are neither rewards nor punishments for politicians who support or oppose ocean policy reform needs to be changed.

"Figuring out what should happen is not the same as having the political horsepower to make it happen," said Stern about groups that have focused primarily on devising policy proposals.

Among other strategies, Stern's group is promoting ocean policy on economic grounds by emphasizing the linkages between clean waters, tourism and fishing. According to the U.S. Commission, tourism and recreation are major contributors to the economy, with more than \$1 trillion generated annually within the area adjacent to the coast. In 2000, the "ocean economy" supported more than two million jobs, the commission stated.

Oceans groups are attempting to galvanize the people and politicians with a vested interest in the ocean. Stern likened the approach to the efforts of duck hunters to save wetlands. "It's going to be ocean users who save the oceans," he said.

In this election cycle, Ocean Champions has endorsed former Republican state Rep. Connie Mack in the race for Florida's 14th Congressional District seat, which is being vacated by retiring Rep. Porter Goss (R). The district encompasses the white sandy beaches of Sanibel Islands and rich recreational fishing grounds surrounding Marco Island. Stern said the group aims to spend about \$50,000 in the race. Mack is the son of former Sen. Connie Mack (R) and faces an Aug. 31 primary prior to the November election.

Jeff Cohen, Mack's campaign manager, said the economic health of the district is "inextricably linked" to the Gulf of Mexico and that his candidate is interested in finding the right balance between environmental protection and economic growth.

Ocean Champions also is venturing into two hotly contested Senate races. They have endorsed former Alaska Democratic Gov. Tony Knowles who is running against Sen. Lisa Murkowski (R). Polls show the candidates at a dead heat, and with representation of the nation's largest coastline at stake, the candidates' ocean positions could influence the outcome, Stern said.

David Festa of Environmental Defense, who serves on Ocean Champions' board in a private capacity, said ocean issues become more important in tight races. "In a number of places where the politics are evenly divided, smaller issues can make a big difference, and oceans is emerging as not just a small issue anymore," he said.

Stern's organization plans to spend up to \$200,000 to support South Carolina Education Superintendent Inez Tenenbaum (D) in her race against Republican Rep. Jim DeMint to replace retiring Democratic Sen. Fritz Hollings. Tenenbaum spokesman Adam Kovacevich said she intends to take up Hollings' ocean policy legacy, which has been a defining issue of his Senate career. Kovacevich said the state's beaches are essential to the economy, and ocean policy is getting some attention amongst other environmental issues in the race.

"We frequently get asked about her position on environmental issues generally, and this is a big environmental issue for our state," he said.

The money being spent by Ocean Champions is likely to be amplified by spending from other environmental groups, such as the League of Conservation Voters, since many candidates who are supported by the broader environmental community are perceived as being in favor of changing ocean management.

Andy Rosenberg, who served on the U.S. Commission, said a broader, active ocean constituency is "absolutely critical." He said the general public needs to realize that ocean issues influence their daily lives. The report called for significant federal investment in an ocean education and research initiative to engage the public.

On the presidential front, Environmental Defense is mounting an advertising campaign to encourage both Democratic nominee John Kerry of Massachusetts and President Bush to pledge to support ocean policy reforms. Kerry has a reputation of being protective of his state's fishing industry, which has sometimes pitted him against ocean advocacy groups, but now on the national level experts said they expect he may broaden his view on oceans issues. He has mainly discussed oceans and fisheries on the campaign trail in the context of clean water.

"We are going to protect our rivers and our bays and our oceans because we want our children to enjoy them," said Kerry on April 20, the same day the U.S. Commission released its preliminary report.

According to the White House Council on Environmental Quality, the Bush administration is conducting an interagency review of the commission's recommendations and is due to come out with its policy response early in the fall. Bush may come out with an oceans agenda through his campaign before then, however.

"I'd be surprised if you don't see something from both campaigns," said Environmental Defense's Festa.

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