



OCEANS: Marine advocates look to new leadership to advance lengthy agenda *(Tuesday, November 18, 2008)*

Allison Winter, *E&E Daily* reporter

Ocean conservation groups are hoping to advance previously deadlocked conservation bills in the new Congress next year, despite the departure of some of their most strident and well-positioned advocates.

The House and Senate are poised to see major turnover next year among lawmakers who previously held key posts overseeing oceans policy and funding. For example, the Senate Commerce Committee is likely to have a new chairman and ranking member next year, and the House Oceans Caucus will lose three of its five co-chairmen.

Ocean conservation advocates said they will rely on other prominent lawmakers -- such as Senate Environment and Public Works Chairwoman Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.) -- to continue support for marine legislation and look to other conservation-minded lawmakers to step up to new leadership roles.

"If there is one place in the world where a vacuum is filled almost as quickly as it occurs, it's the United States Congress," said Dave Allison, senior campaign director for Oceana. "I would anticipate there will be several people that will step in ... the question is going to be whether they have had the real experience, background and have the staff that really cares about oceans issues."

Environmental groups hope the expanded Democratic majority can help advance ocean-friendly climate change and energy legislation, as well as new fisheries requirements, ocean governance proposals and smaller-scale ocean and sanctuary bills that have been deadlocked in the Senate.

"We've got a lot of momentum coming into the new administration and the new Congress," said Amanda Leland, Environmental Defense's oceans policy director. "There will be a lot of change in leadership around oceans ... but our intention is to carry forward our recommendations and talk to leadership and whoever else is there."

Marine advocates acknowledge the loss of some of their longtime champions -- including Reps. Wayne Gilchrest (R-Md.) and Jim Saxton (R-N.J.), who were co-chairmen of the House Oceans Caucus and worked to advance several bipartisan ocean and fishery conservation bills.

"The loss of people like Wayne Gilchrest and Jim Saxton certainly will be felt," said Kevin Wheeler, director of external affairs for the Consortium for Ocean Leadership.

But they hope other marine-inclined lawmakers will step up to the plate. Most of the 34 different candidates that the California-based political advocacy group Oceans Champions endorsed won their races this fall. Four of the group's designated "oceans champions" won their Senate races, and 22 won in the House. The group based its endorsements on past legislative history and interviews.

"I feel that the opportunity is there with the new leaders in place, along with some seasoned legislators who know how to get things done," said Oceans Champions President David Wilmot. "Now our challenge is to help them see which pieces are the most important, and build the grassroots support to get things passed."

Agenda

Marine advocates are not short on requests for the new lawmakers. Heavy-lifting on their agenda includes climate legislation and a move to put more restrictions back in place for offshore oil and gas drilling.

Many environmental groups want to reverse the action Congress took earlier this year to lift the offshore leasing moratorium and close off at least some of the potentially sensitive areas of the East Coast to oil and gas development.

"The action that you are going to see most aggressively from the conservation community as a whole is going to be an effort to restore the moratorium on offshore oil and gas leasing," said Allison.

Marine advocates are also hoping for easier victories with some legislation that easily moved through the House and Senate committees last year but has faced roadblocks on the Senate floor, including bills on ocean acidification, marine sanctuaries, coastal observation and estuaries. Also on the wish-list is a wide-ranging oceans governance bill that would formally authorize the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and legislation to address harmful algal blooms.

A working group of former Clinton-era agency heads, scientists and ocean conservationists is pushing Congress and the new administration to take on new fisheries conservation laws.

"I believe it is going to become a political issue in the best sense of the word," former Clinton-era Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt said in an interview last week. "Not as controversy but in the sense of increasing public interest ... translating into demands for action. I really believe the time is at hand."

The working group, assembled by Environmental Defense, released a report last week that called on Congress to pass legislation to require fishery councils to consider cap-and-trade management for all their fishery management plans.

The "Oceans of Abundance" group says that scientific research is on their side: recent studies have predicted a collapse of wild fish stocks in coming years if current overfishing trends continue. Other studies in recent months in the journals *Science* and *Nature* have said collapse rates can be cut in half in fisheries that set strict commercial limits and give fishers some ownership in catch.

Another long-stalled ocean priority for marine groups is ratification of the U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea, a treaty that the Bush administration and a majority of senators endorsed, but a few key lawmakers have stymied. Advocates said they are hopeful Vice President-elect Joe Biden, who ushered the treaty through his Foreign Affairs Committee, can use his new leverage to place increased pressure on senators to see it through.

"They could use that to raise the flag pretty quickly to show as a demonstration that the new politics is different from the old," said Allison.

The treaty governs energy exploration on the seafloor, navigation and environmental issues. It has garnered an impressive, wide-ranging list of supporters -- including the Joint Chiefs of Staff, all living former chiefs of Naval operations, four former secretaries of state, the heads of the American Petroleum Institute and the Natural Resources Defense Council, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the governors of seven coastal states.

Leadership shifts

In many cases, marine advocates will be turning to new leaders to ask for help in passing and financing these proposals.

In the Senate, Commerce Chairman Daniel Inouye (D-Hawaii) will be handing over his gavel to take

over leadership of the Appropriations Committee. And Sen. Ted Stevens (R-Alaska), long the goliath for oceans and fisheries issues, is slipping in his election recount and facing possible expulsion from the Senate because of corruption charges.

Stevens used some of his heft as the longest-serving Republican in the Senate to support oceans and fisheries issues and has been the go-to man for marine conservation advocates in Washington. As the ranking member and "co-chairman" of the Commerce Committee and the second-highest ranking Republican on the Appropriations Committee, Stevens was well-placed to move legislation and secure funding for oceans projects.

Marine conservation advocates credit Stevens with getting much of the increased funding for NOAA and the National Marine Fisheries Service. He was also instrumental in the passage of his namesake Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act, the mammoth bill that oversees U.S. fisheries management.

"I don't think you'll see another Ted Stevens in the sense of someone having such absolute dominance over decisionmaking with regard to the ocean," said Allison. "It has been so clearly the domain of Senator Stevens in the past, but I think we'll see that being spread around, and find some new people stepping in."

Sens. Jay Rockefeller (D-W.Va.) and Kay Bailey Hutchison (R-Texas) are expected to be the chairman and ranking member of the Commerce Committee next year. Neither has shown a great interest in ocean conservation issues, but their oceans subcommittee is likely to retain Sens. Maria Cantwell (D-Wash.) and Olympia Snowe (R-Maine) on its leadership. Oceans groups say they have good working relationships with both senators.

Marine advocates are also looking to EPW Chairwoman Boxer to include ocean conservation in any climate legislation and continue her fight for bills like a proposal to expand marine sanctuaries that she introduced last year. For funding issues, they hope to rely on Sen. Barbara Mikulski (D-Md.), whose state is home to NOAA headquarters, and Sens. Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.) and Jack Reed (D-R.I.), who have both shown an interest in oceans.

On the House side, only two of the five co-chairs of the House oceans caucus -- Reps. Sam Farr (D-Calif.) and Jay Inslee (D-Wash.) -- will remain in the House next year. Farr is the only remaining of those who originally formed the caucus in 1999.

The caucus is losing Gilchrest, Saxton and Rep. Tom Allen (D-Maine), who lost his Senate bid.

Marine advocates expect to see continued support from Natural Resources Committee Chairman Nick Rahall (D-W.Va.), Oceans Subcommittee Chairwoman Madeleine Bordallo (D-Guam) and Rep. Vernon Ehlers (R-Mich.) on the Science Committee.

"They are there and positioned, and we should be able to see some legislation get moved through that committee," Wilmot said of the Natural Resources panel.

Oceans groups also identified Appropriations Committee members Reps. Patrick Kennedy (D-R.I.), Debbie Wasserman Schultz (D-Fla.) and the members of the Commerce-Justice-Science Appropriations Subcommittee among their allies.

The Oceans Champions endorsement list also includes two new lawmakers in each chamber: incoming Senate Democrats Kay Hagan, who has worked on water conservation issues in North Carolina, and Jeanne Shaheen, who advanced energy initiatives as the former governor of New Hampshire.

The group also endorsed the two Democrats taking over Saxton and Gilchrest's seats: John Adler in New Jersey and Frank Kratovil in Maryland. Kratovil supports Chesapeake Bay restoration and Adler has opposed offshore oil drilling.

Oceans Champions also backed Mark Begich, the Democrat running for Sen. Ted Stevens (R-Alaska) seat. Wilmot said that decision came because they saw Stevens as "damaged goods."