

Senate Commerce Subcommittee considers NOAA Blue Economy Initiative

July 24, 2018

The acting administrator of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Rear Admiral Tim Gallaudet, appeared before the Senate Commerce Subcommittee on Oceans, Atmosphere, Fisheries, and Coast Guard on July 24 to answer questions about NOAA's Blue Economy Initiative. According to Gallaudet, the blue economy, which includes marine transportation, tourism, ocean exploration, and fisheries, amounts to approximately \$320 billion of the United States' gross domestic product (GDP).

In his opening statement, Gallaudet said that "the United States has mapped the moon and Mars to a better resolution than our own seafloor. Thus, NOAA is examining ways to expand activities related to the mapping of our [Exclusive Economic Zone]." He acknowledged the nation's current critical mineral import reliance and indicated that NOAA would help address the critical mineral crisis through ocean exploration. He also stated that President Donald Trump's proclamation of National Ocean Month will "set the stage" for NOAA's approach to the blue economy for this administration. This proclamation emphasized the role of exploring, mapping, and taking inventory of U.S. waters and pursuing observational and forecasting capabilities to benefit the economic, security, and environmental interests of the United States. The Rear Admiral drew attention to a recent NOAA mapping and monitoring success using high resolution bathymetric maps and oceanographic monitoring at the port of Long Beach, which provided precise, real-time sounding to optimize vessel loading, allowing vessels to carry up to \$2 million worth of extra product for each additional foot that a ship's hull could be submerged in the port.

Gallaudet fielded various questions on the blue economy, particularly related to mapping. Senator Dan Sullivan (R-OH) claimed that the hydrographic mapping of Alaska is "woefully inadequate" and asked what plans NOAA has to improve nautical mapping. Gallaudet responded that NOAA's Office of Coast Survey is currently planning to map the entirety of the U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), the 200 nautical mile-wide zone surrounding the US coast, by 2030. He assured the senator that this program is funded. Senator Gary Peters (D-MI) noted that NOAA is responsible for providing environmental sensitivity maps summarizing the nation's coastal resources at risk of oil spills, and pressed Gallaudet to explain why twenty years have passed since NOAA's maps of the Great Lakes were last updated.

Senators at the hearing also questioned Gallaudet about his recent presentation at the Department of Commerce Vision Setting Summit earlier this month. The Rear Admiral's controversial presentation introduced an altered NOAA mission statement that removed mentions of climate change and resilience. Gallaudet replied that the purpose of the presentation was to foster discussion amongst NOAA officials regarding the agency's alignment with the Department of Commerce's strategic plan, and that it was not intended to create change in the agency's mission or policy. Additionally, Senator Tammy Baldwin (D-WI) questioned the content of the Office of Science and Technology Policy's (OSTP) decadal ocean vision document, which outlines goals to advance ocean science but does not include the phrase "climate change." Pointing to NOAA's current climate services and the almost \$100 million allotted to climate research in fiscal year 2018 as evidence, Gallaudet vowed that NOAA is committed to the climate and conservation elements of its mission.

Sources: Department of Commerce; Federal Register; U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation; Washington Post; White House.
