

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

November 25, 2009

The Honorable Gary Locke
Secretary
Department of Commerce
1401 Constitution Ave NW
Washington, DC 20230

The Honorable Jane Lubchenco
Under Secretary for Oceans and Atmosphere
Department of Commerce
1401 Constitution Ave NW, Room 5128
Washington, DC 20230

Dear Secretary Locke and Under Secretary Lubchenco:

As expressed in previous letters, we are troubled by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) recent proposal to move its Marine Operations Center-Pacific (MOC-P) from its long-standing home in the Puget Sound. While the Government Accountability Office (GAO) continues to examine whether the competition for this facility was fair, we continue to have larger policy concerns outside the scope of GAO's review. One particular concern we have is whether NOAA failed to consider important weather and ocean conditions in its selection of a site for the MOC-P facility.

The first European explorers, traveling by sea to the Pacific Northwest, quickly recognized the strategic importance of the shelter and safe harbor of the Puget Sound. The outer Pacific coast's weather had a deadly impact on mariners – a legacy ingrained in the region's geography. Names like Cape Disappointment and Dead Man's Cove are permanent reminders of the dangerous power of the coast's weather, winds, and waves. Weather and ocean conditions on the outer coast were so dangerous, in fact, that the U.S. Navy in the 1800s considered it strategically essential to secure seaports in the Puget Sound. Access to the Puget Sound was such a high priority that it was one of the reasons the U.S. and Britain agreed to a border at the forty-ninth parallel.

In the Solicitation for Offers for choosing the MOC-P site, it initially appeared that NOAA was keeping with the centuries-old tradition of recognizing the major implications of the outer coast's severe weather and ocean conditions. NOAA's list of technical criteria included factors like "site protection," "tidal range & water characteristics," and "unscheduled port closures." While these factors implied that NOAA was considering the dramatic and sometimes dangerous conditions that might face the agency's vessels, a retrospective examination makes us deeply worried that these criteria were actually very limited in scope and that NOAA did not look at many of the conditions that would face its ships. We worry that the factors "site protection" and "tidal range & water characteristics" only examined the immediate conditions directly at the proposed pier, and that "unscheduled port closures" would have only captured the most extreme

circumstances leading to a full-blown closure of the entire port facility, but not capture restrictions or closures of vessel traffic due to weather.

The proposed new MOC-P site in Newport, Oregon exhibits the difficult conditions experienced at most outer coast sites. While the river estuary itself (Yaquina Bay) may afford some level of protection, the river bar conditions are difficult and dangerous much of the year and pose a major challenge for vessels seeking to transit into or out of the port. For example, the U.S. Coast Guard implemented restrictions to vessels trying to enter/depart Yaquina Bay due to weather and ocean conditions 202 days during calendar year 2008. Furthermore, severe weather and ocean conditions led the Coast Guard to completely close the entrance to Yaquina Bay on one occasion for 29 hours during 2008. We are deeply concerned that because of the way the weather criteria were structured in the MOC-P selection process, none of these basic facts were captured or considered during the selection process.

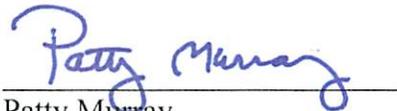
By selectively examining only the weather, wind, and wave conditions at the proposed pier and ignoring the difficult and sometimes dangerous conditions its vessels would encounter when entering and exiting Yaquina Bay, we believe that NOAA failed to examine the full suite of conditions relevant for the MOC-P site selection process. NOAA actively ignored one of the most basic and obvious considerations for siting a maritime center in the Pacific Northwest, turning its back on hundreds of years of maritime experience. In addition to risking damage to the agency's ships, NOAA is gambling with the safety of its crew and scientists. In our view, this is entirely unacceptable.

We question whether the full impact of weather and ocean conditions facing NOAA's vessels at the proposed MOC-P site was adequately analyzed as a part of the MOC-P long-term lease award process. We request that you take a fresh look at this important topic and conduct a formal independent review of its implications in the context of whether moving NOAA's Marine Operations Center-Pacific to Newport, Oregon is truly a wise decision for NOAA, its employees, and its scientific missions.

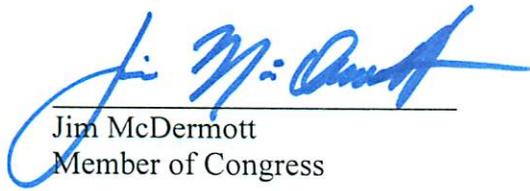
Respectfully,



Maria Cantwell
United States Senator
Chair, Subcommittee on Oceans, Atmosphere,
Fisheries and Coast Guard



Patty Murray
United States Senator



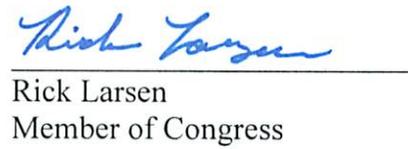
Jim McDermott
Member of Congress



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