

# United States Senate

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

April 26, 2012

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## **Leadership of Senate Oceans Subcommittee and Oceans Caucus**

### ***Introduce bill to develop 21<sup>st</sup> century ocean survey workforce***

Washington, D.C. - Senators Mark Begich of Alaska and Olympia Snowe of Maine, who lead the Senate Subcommittee on Oceans, Atmosphere, Fisheries and Coast Guard, were joined by the leaders of the Senate Oceans Caucus, Senators Sheldon Whitehouse of Rhode Island and Lisa Murkowski of Alaska, as well as Senate President Pro Tempore Daniel K. Inouye of Hawaii, in introducing a bill to improve the nation's ocean survey workforce.

The bill reauthorizes the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Commissioned Officer Corps, (the NOAA Corps) and provides mechanisms to help the Corps improve both its diversity and retention of senior female officers. The NOAA Corps is the smallest of the seven uniformed service of the United States, with 318 active commissioned officers.

"In Alaska, oceans are key to our economic prosperity, from fishing to oil and gas to transportation of goods and people. We rely on the NOAA Corps to chart shipping routes and survey fish populations," said Sen. **Begich**, Chair of the Senate Oceans subcommittee. "As we expand activity in the Arctic, we will rely on the Corps even more for baseline scientific research in that region. We need to attract the best and brightest young men and women to the Corps and ensure that we retain knowledgeable senior officers."

"It is critical that we reauthorize and enhance the NOAA Commissioned Officers Corps to ensure that this small but critical branch of the uniformed service remains a strong support service for our nation's fishermen and mariners," said Sen. **Snowe**, Ranking Member of the Senate Oceans subcommittee. "NOAA Corps provides critical support for NOAA's missions, from conducting the fish surveys that our stock assessments rely on to performing the charting that ensures safe passage for our mariners – tasks which its skilled officers perform admirably. I am also pleased that our legislation would focus on recruiting and retaining more women and minority officers for this important service."

"Hawaii is a true ocean state where both our culture and our economy are inextricably linked to the sea and its resources. That is why NOAA and its mission of supporting the public with information regarding the oceans and atmosphere is incredibly important to the people of Hawaii. The NOAA Officer Corps serves at the heart of this mission and I am therefore proud to join Senator Begich in introducing legislation that would strengthen and modernize the Corps.

The NOAA Corps provides Hawaii with invaluable information about our shipping lanes, fishery resources, and cultural heritage and serves the nation through important research on climate fluctuations such as the El Nino phenomenon. The NOAA Amendments Act of 2012 will better align NOAA Corps Officer obligations and benefits with the other uniformed services and adds a number of important provisions to improve recruitment and retention so that NOAA may continue to be served by the best and brightest. I ask my colleagues to join us in supporting this important bill,” said Sen. **Inouye**.

“Alaska is the only state that borders two oceans, and they provide ample opportunities in fishing, resource development, tourism, shipping and other ways that are only now being initiated as the Arctic opens up,” said Sen. **Murkowski**, Co-Chair of the U.S. Senate Oceans Caucus. “This bill is an essential step in our pioneering work as it allows us to recruit and retain the best candidates available to advance baseline data collection and research for thoughtful, sound policy.”

“In Rhode Island, the strength of our economy depends on the health of our oceans. The NOAA Corps provides valuable expertise and critical data for our marine industries. This legislation will help ensure that the Corps remains a strong and diverse part of our nation’s ongoing mission to better understand our oceans,” said Sen. **Whitehouse**, Co-Chair of the U.S. Senate Oceans Caucus.

The NOAA Corps Amendments Act of 2012 has several provisions to improve the Corps’ diversity, including one modeled on the Coast Guard’s successful “Blue 21” program. It authorizes financial support of highly qualified minority science and engineering college students if they agree to join the NOAA Corps. Another provision will help more senior officers balance the demands of going to sea nine months a year with having a family, by allowing for an unpaid ‘sabbatical’ in which officers can leave the service for a few years to start a family and then return at the rank they had before leaving.

The bill has been endorsed by the Military Officers Association of America, the National Military Family Association and the National Association for Uniformed Services.

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