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NEWSDESK 26 Apr 2004 14:28:23 GMT U.S. oceans report says coastal areas in peril

By Maggie Fox, Health and Science Correspondent

WASHINGTON, April 20 (Reuters) - Pollution, overfishing and poor management have put North America's oceans in serious peril, but it is not too late to save them, the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy said on Tuesday.

It recommends setting up a special office at the White House to oversee a new, coordinated policy, doubling investment in scientific research and strengthening the ability of the government to police polluters and fisheries.

"Our oceans and coasts are in trouble, and we as a nation have an historic opportunity to make a positive and lasting change in the way we manage them before it is too late," retired Navy Adm. James Watkins, who chaired the commission, told a news conference.

"Too many years of inattention and lack of investment are threatening this national treasure," he added.

"If the recommendations contained in our report are adopted, we will create sustainable oceans and coasts for many, many years."

Among the recommendations:

-- Establish a National Ocean Council in the Executive Office of the President chaired by an Assistant to the President.

-- Strengthen the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and improve federal agency structure.

-- Double U.S. investment in ocean research.

Environmentalists expressed hope that, because the commission was set up by a bipartisan act of Congress, it might be possible to get through legislation enacting its proposals.

"The White House and Congress must seize the opportunity to craft a new ocean management system while consensus is strong," Natural Resources Defense Council President John Adams, who helped write a similar report for the non-profit Pew Oceans Commission, said in a statement.

MANAGING FISHERIES

"We can do a much better job of protecting fish populations, for example, by limiting catch levels based on science, and safeguarding fish nursery areas and vulnerable sea bottom habitats from harmful fishing practices like bottom trawling," added Daniel Pauly, director of the University of British Columbia's Fisheries Centre.

The Commission heard testimony from 440 experts, including ocean scientists and researchers, environmental groups, industry, the public and government officials for the report.

It attempts to quantify the value of the oceans as an overall industry.

"America's oceans and coasts are big business. The United States has jurisdiction over 3.4 million square nautical miles of ocean territory in its exclusive economic zone -- larger than the combined land area of all 50 states," the report reads.

It estimates the ocean did \$117 billion in business in 2000, three quarters of it due to tourism and recreation.

"Annually, the nation's ports handle more than \$700 billion in goods, and the cruise industry and its passengers account for \$11 billion in spending. The commercial fishing industry's total value exceeds \$28 billion annually, with the recreational saltwater fishing industry valued at around \$20 billion," the report reads.

But pollution threatens these lucrative industries.

"In 2001, 23 percent of the nation's estuarine areas were impaired for swimming, fishing and supporting marine species. Meanwhile, pollution could jeopardize the safety of drinking water for millions of people living near or around the Great Lakes," the report reads.

Every year more than 23 million gallons of oil run off into North American waters, it said.

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