Sean M. Duffy, Sr. Chair
Nathan Wardwell, Vice Chair

August 7, 2025

Ms. Laura Grimm
Chief of Staff
Performing the Duties of Under Secretary
of Commerce for Oceans and Atmosphere
and NOAA Administrator
U.S. Department of Commerce
1401 Constitution Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20230

Dear Ms. Grimm,

We are writing to follow up on the Hydrographic Services Review Panel (HSRP) meeting held virtually on May 29, 2025, and to reiterate some of the critical points and action items from our discussions. It was a pleasure to meet at the Port of New Orleans just prior to the HSRP meeting. The Mississippi River Ship Channel combines five deep-draft ports that move 20% of the Nation's waterborne commerce with $273.1 million in cargo moving every 24-hours. Navigation users rely on and utilize information provided by the collective National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) to promote safe navigation daily and more importantly during critical events such as extreme water-level events, tropical storms or hurricanes, floods, and droughts. During trying times, navigation consumers consistently monitor and rely upon this valuable information to make analytic commercial decisions.

The virtual meeting, while necessary due to unforeseen circumstances, underscored the challenges of a remote format in fostering the personal relationships and brainstorming sessions that enhance the Panel's effectiveness. We strongly believe that future HSRP meetings should be conducted in person whenever possible to maximize our dialogue, impact and efficiency.

The meeting highlighted the unprecedented changes and disruptive challenges facing NOAA, particularly the impacts of severe staffing reductions and budget constraints. Despite these hurdles, we recognize and commend NOAA's commitment to its core mission, including the modernization of the National Spatial Reference System (NSRS). The Panel remains gravely concerned about the "geodesy crisis"—the shortage of skilled geodesists—which poses a significant risk to the Nation's foundational reference systems and could lead to a loss of U.S. global leadership in this domain. We urge NOAA to continue to find ways to rebuild and sustain the geodetic workforce pipeline.

The Panel also stressed the critical importance of NOAA's foundational products and services to the U.S. economy and national security. The PORTS® program was highlighted as vital for navigation safety, and we reiterate our strong, long-standing belief that it should be a wholly owned federal program without a private industry cost share component. Precision navigation, accurate water level data, and enhanced weather prediction capabilities are all essential to protect maritime commerce, and we recommend increased investment in these areas.

The Panel discussed the need for NOAA to secure adequate funding for core products and services to meet increasing demands, especially for underserved communities lacking foundational data and geodetic infrastructure. The Panel is also enthusiastic about the future of the Center of Excellence for Operational Ocean and Great Lakes Mapping at the University of New Hampshire and recommends early engagement with industry and trade organizations to support its efforts.

Moving forward, the Panel is committed to increasing efforts to educate the public about the crucial, often invisible, role that NOAA's navigation services play. We are developing a strategy for a direct briefing for new NOAA leadership to convey the urgency of these issues and will be compiling an Issue Paper to strengthen our collective message. We also plan to continue key initiatives such as the Seascape Alaska and Lakebed 2030.

Our recommendations based on key takeaways from the meeting are:

1. **Prioritize Expansion and Resilience of Real-Time Observing Systems:** Real-time data are mission-critical to navigational safety, seaport operations, incident response, and national infrastructure protection. Gaps or interruptions directly impact safety and commerce. The Panel recommends expanding the reach and robustness of the PORTS® and NWLON systems with an emphasis on high-priority seaports; redundancy to minimize downtime during extreme weather events, and integrated access to all real-time parameters (water level, currents, wind, and visibility).
2. **Accelerate VDatum and Geodetic Infrastructure Coverage:** A seamless, authoritative vertical datum is essential for safe navigation, infrastructure development, coastal hazard preparedness and emergency response. The Panel recommends investing in the completion of nationwide coverage for VDatum, the modernized National Spatial Reference System and the Continuously Operating Reference Station Network.
3. **Streamline Contracting and Technology Deployment:** Industry often moves faster than the federal processes can support. The National Ocean Service (NOS) must match industry's pace to remain relevant, responsive and efficient in-service delivery. The Panel recommends modernizing and simplifying procurement and contracting processes to enable faster response to emerging needs to reduce time to deploy new observing assets and data tools and support agile partnerships with private industry and academia.
4. **Strengthen Public-Private-Academic Partnerships:** Industry and academia bring innovation, speed, and local insight. Leveraging their capabilities through structured partnerships maximizes the impact of NOS investments. The Panel recommends formalizing frameworks that encourage multi-sector collaboration for co-funding stations and sensor networks with pilot projects that incorporate private-sector technologies with more frequent opportunities for end-user feedback and co-design.
5. **Reaffirm and Promote NOS' Authoritative Role:** Strengthen NOS' public trust and credibility by reinforcing its authoritative position ensuring consistent adoption of standards and widespread support from federal, state and commercial users. Lastly, the Panel recommends an investment in communications and outreach that emphasize the value of NOS's data and "stamp of approval"; training users on NOS tools; and ensure broad understanding of NOS standards across sectors.

The Panel benefitted greatly from the support and leadership updates provided throughout the meetings especially from Ms. Rachael Dempsey, Deputy Assistant Administrator for the NOS, RDML Benjamin Evans, Director of Coast Survey and the Designated Federal Officer for the HSRP, Ms. Katie Collins-Garrett, Deputy Director of the Center for Operational Oceanographic Products and Services (CO-OPS), Mr. Brad Kearse, Deputy Director the National Geodetic Survey (NGS), and Captain (ret.) Andy Armstrong of the Joint Hydrographic Center at the University of New Hampshire.

We look forward to meeting in person this fall and continuing our collaborative efforts to support and improve NOAA Navigation Services.

Sincerely,

Sean M. Duffy

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Chair, HSRP.

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Vice Chair, HSRP