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United States Senate

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June 5, 2007

Vice Admiral Conrad Lautenbacher,
Administrator
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
14th Street & Constitution Avenue, NW
Room 6217
Washington, DC 20230

Dear Vice Admiral Conrad Lautenbacher,

I appreciate the commitment and dedication of both you and the staff at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). NOAA serves all Americans by warning of dangerous weather, charting our seas and skies, guiding our use and protection of ocean and coastal resources, and conducting research to improve our understanding and stewardship of the environment which sustains us all.

These are important missions. That is why I am concerned when tax dollars are spent on activities that are non-essential or not our highest priorities.

I was, therefore, disappointed to learn that NOAA was spending scarce resources on a "200 year anniversary celebration." This is especially true considering the agency is only 37 years old according to your own website, which reads:

"October 1970. President Richard M. Nixon was on his way to the Middle East when Egyptian President Nassar died. The Pittsburgh Steelers were putting a lot of faith in their new rookie quarterback, Terry Bradshaw. The top grossing movie of the month was Tora! Tora! Tora! - and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, a new federal agency to observe, predict and protect our environment, was born. In a July 1970 statement to Congress, President Nixon proposed creating NOAA to serve a national need '...for better protection of life and property from natural hazards...for a better understanding of the total environment...[and] for exploration and development leading to the intelligent use of our marine resources...' On October 3, NOAA was established under the Department of Commerce. More than 30 years later, NOAA still works for America every day."[1]

[1] http://www.publicaffairs.noaa.gov/back.html

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According to the website, "throughout the year, NOAA will be hosting an array of events around the country to celebrate the agency's 200-year history." Among those listed include a Washington, DC gala, a reception for members of Congress, a festival and concert at Hawaii's Waikiki beach park, outreach at the Iowa State Fair, and other activities.

Oddly enough, "During 2000, NOAA celebrated its 30th anniversary as a federal agency," according to the NOAA website.[2] That year there was also a series of celebrations to recognize that anniversary.

It seems difficult to justify this year's bogus anniversary while other priorities face reductions in funding. NOAA has, for example, cut funding for a hurricane research program, according to the *Miami Herald*.[3] I do not know the merits of this particular research program but I do know that protecting people from hurricanes should be a greater priority than fanfare and celebrations. The Associated Press (AP), likewise, has reported that a December 11 memorandum prepared for the White House by NOAA and NASA warned that "the overall climate program [is] in serious jeopardy" due to the downsizing in the number of climate sensor satellites. The AP describes this program as a "costly and problem-plagued satellite initiative begun more than a decade ago" with "technology glitches and a near-doubling in the original $6.5 billion cost."[4] Yet, if NOAA believes this program to be essential, perhaps the agency could forgo periodic anniversary celebrations and other lower priority activities to ensure it has adequate resources.

Could you please provide a total cost estimate of all activities and expenses associated with NOAA's 30th anniversary celebration held in 2000 and NOAA's 200th anniversary celebration being held this year? Please also include an itemized listing of all related expenses and activities involved with these anniversaries.

Thank you for your assistance with this matter. I look forward to working with you to advance NOAA's mission in a fiscally responsible manner.

Sincerely,

Tom A. Coburn, M.D.
U.S. Senator

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[2] http://www.30th.noaa.gov/sevents.html
[3] Martin Merzer. "Storm director says feds wasting millions," Miami Herald, May 17, 2007, Page A1.
[4] "U.S. scales back climate science via satellites," Associated Press, June 4, 2007. http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/19030744/