

April 10, 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 was very concerned by a *Baltimore Sun* article published this past week (“Oystermen reap federal bounty”) regarding NOAA funding for the Oyster Recovery Partnership in Maryland.

According to the *Sun*:

“Since 2002 alone, the partnership has received \$10 million in federal funds to lead Maryland's efforts to make oysters an abundant, self-sustaining species again. ...

“The group not only provides watermen a crop to harvest, but it also pays them to do work that many scientists say has little merit.

“The Sun found:

- While the partnership has planted tens of millions of hatchery-raised oysters, less than a third have been put in protected sanctuaries. Most are planted in places where they can be harvested.
- The group is paying the Maryland Watermen's Association nearly \$400,000 this year to remove diseased oysters from one part of the bay and dump them in another. Proponents say this practice helps other oysters survive, but it has no proven scientific value. Critics say a primary benefit is to provide work for watermen.
- The head of the Watermen's Association sits on the partnership's board and is among those who benefit financially from the federal grants. Association president Larry Simms Sr. doled out tens of thousands of dollars of the grant money to watermen last year to help plant or move oysters. Also, he collected \$40,100 for supervising their work.

- The group used \$46,000 in federal funds to hold its annual meeting at the Hyatt Regency, a golf resort and spa. The money went not just for the fancy dinner but also for hotel rooms for 50 of the guests.”

The *Sun* refers to the funding for this program as an earmark, yet funding for the project is not listed in the Office of Management and Budget earmark database (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/earmarks/preview-public-site/agencies/bureaus/accountsef34.html?source=APP&agency=006&bureau=48> ).

Could you please provide answers to the following questions:

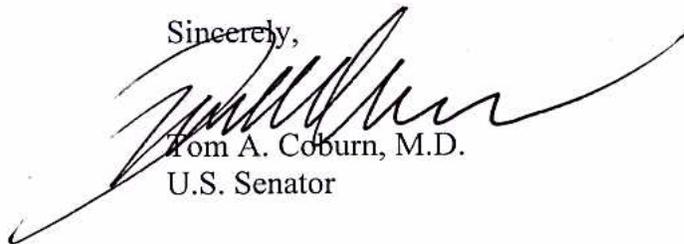
- 1) Has NOAA ever requested funding for this project or is it a Congressional earmark? If NOAA requested funding, what is the justification for the request?
- 2) The Partnership’s website states: “The Oyster Recovery Partnership is a coalition of organizations, institutions, businesses and individuals dedicated to helping restore the health of the Chesapeake Bay by restoring the Bay’s oyster population.” Have there been any assessments of the federal funds that have been provided to the Partnership to determine (a) if its stated goals are being met; and (b) that the activities being funded are cost effective? If so, please provide copies.
- 3) What oversight has NOAA conducted of this specific grant, particularly was NOAA aware that funds were being used for banquets or of the financial conflicts of interest between staff and organizations receiving funding? How much has been spent from this grant, by year, on banquets, conferences, meetings and travel?
- 4) Has NOAA ever conducted an audit of the funding received by the Partnership? If so, were any irregularities identified?
- 5) Does NOAA routinely audit, evaluate or review the budget of earmark and grant recipients? If so, what is typically involved with this process?

Could you please also provide the following information:

- 6) The total amount NOAA has provided to the Partnership including a breakdown by fiscal year;
- 7) Using the best available estimates, the oyster population of the Chesapeake Bay (a) in 1994 when the Partnership was formed ,and (b) in the most recently available year for which an estimate is available; and
- 8) The Partnership’s contracts with the Watermen’s Association.

Thank you for your attention to this matter. I look forward to working with you to improve the stewardship of the environment and our nation's finances.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tom Coburn', written in a cursive style. The signature is positioned above the printed name and title.

Tom A. Coburn, M.D.

U.S. Senator

Attachment: *Baltimore Sun* article