Dear Secretary Locke:

As you prepare the Department of Commerce’s fiscal year (FY) 2012 budget request, we write to call attention to the utility of data collected from the Integrated Ocean Observing System (IOOS) in Deepwater Horizon spill response efforts, and to the immense, unrealized value of a fully operational ocean observing system throughout the nation. Current funding for the IOOS system remains inadequate, and we strongly urge the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and the Department of Commerce to increase funding for IOOS in the FY12 budget request.

IOOS is a critical tool in coastal emergency response as well as an essential component in improving understanding, predictions, forecasts, stewardship and wise use of the nation’s productive and valuable oceans, coasts and Great Lakes. We must ensure that we are prepared for these challenges with a robust and sustained ocean observing system. To this end, Congress has consistently increased funding for NOAA IOOS over the amounts requested by the agency, which remain low in FY11. In fact, NOAA’s request for IOOS in FY11 is less than the amount Congress appropriated for the program in FY08.

This past March, 30 Representatives and 22 Senators supported the authorized level of $53 million for IOOS in FY11 – representing an increase of almost $32 million over the President’s FY11 budget request, but still falling far below the $138 million the US Ocean Commission on Ocean Policy proposed simply for initial IOOS startup costs in 2004. Such investments are dwarfed when compared to the value of the nation’s coastal economy: according to NOAA’s State of the Coast project, U.S. coastal counties contributed $7.9 trillion to the GDP and supported 69 million jobs in 2007.

Even in its limited capacity, the IOOS community is rallying to aid the Deepwater Horizon response effort proving that IOOS is a wise investment. The following aspects of IOOS are especially poignant examples of the system’s value – and limitations – in this emergency:

- **Sustained observations:** Sustained long-term observations provide data for forecasts that guide the work of responders as well as baseline information that will be critical during restoration. A combination of mooring instrumentation (measuring surface meteorology, water column currents, temperature and salinity) and profilers and gliders (providing mapping in three dimensions) are part of a suite of ocean observing instrumentation that are capturing data that will assist in the Deepwater Horizon BP oil
spill response. These instruments can locate and track oil at various levels in the water column as well as on the Gulf surface. The knowledge and technology exists to maintain an ongoing suite of ocean observations in the Gulf, however funding to maintain these systems has reached a critical level. Several oceanographic buoys that would have been useful to response efforts were not in place at the time of the spill because of inadequate funding levels. This situation is not unique to the Gulf region.

- **Surface current mapping with high-frequency radar:** On a national level, high-frequency (HF) radar surface current mapping systems remain underfunded. These systems provide real time data on the direction and strength of surface currents. Even in regions that have made progress in building the systems, like California, no operational funding has been identified. In the Gulf, where the majority of U.S. deepwater oil drilling takes place, systems have not been fully deployed. As part of the response effort, IOOS partners re-deployed three HF radar units in the Gulf that had been disbanded due to lack of funding. These data are now fed directly into NOAA’s database at the National Data Buoy Center and used by NOAA in their daily trajectory forecasts.

- **Data management:** Rapid access to all relevant information is essential to response efforts. Over the last few years, IOOS has devoted time and expertise to creating a national data integration framework based on standards and protocols that allows for the integration of data from both federal and non-federal sources. This investment has paid off; because of this work, the Coast Guard and NOAA have had access to all IOOS data – from research institutions, industry, state agencies and NGOs – in the Gulf from the beginning of their response efforts. These efforts must continue and be expanded to include critical biological data as well.

Funding for IOOS at the levels outlined in the 2004 Commission on Ocean Policy’s Report, would have ensured that sustained observations were in place before the spill, providing critical data to oil spill trajectory models and to the responders. Additional funding for IOOS will aid in emergency response capabilities like those needed in the Gulf now, assuring that the appropriate infrastructure will exist throughout our oceans, coasts and Great Lakes. This funding will also help realize other benefits of an integrated ocean observing system, including real-time monitoring and long-term assessments relevant to climate trends, water quality, marine operations and coastal hazards.

Thank you for your commitment to a sustained, integrated ocean observing system for the safety, vitality and future of our oceans, coasts and Great Lakes.

Sincerely,

cc: Peter Orszag, Director, Office of Management and Budget