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R.I. Senator Whitehouse proposes national fund for ocean research

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PROVIDENCE — The researchers called themselves “The Insomniacs,” because they would take boats out on Narragansett Bay after midnight to measure oxygen levels in the water when they were at their lowest.

The late-night work — a collaboration by Brown University, Save The Bay and other groups to track conditions that are crucial to the health of native fish and mollusks — started in 1999 with a group of volunteers. It continues now (mostly during daylight hours) with the help of federal grants, but a key funding stream from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration is due to expire at the end of this year.

“Either we just don’t do it anymore, or we do it through volunteers again,” said David Murray, a senior research associate at Brown University in geology and environmental studies.

The research that Murray and the other Insomniacs are doing is just the type of program that U.S. Sen. [Sheldon Whitehouse](#) says should be supported with dedicated funding from the federal government.

During a news conference Thursday overlooking Narragansett Bay, Rhode Island’s junior senator announced legislation that would create a national fund with hundreds of millions of dollars that would distribute money to study, restore and conserve U.S. ocean waters and coastal areas as well as the Great Lakes.

After the Senate reconvenes in Washington on Monday, Whitehouse, a Democrat, and Sen. Olympia Snowe, Republican of Maine, plan to introduce the bill to set up what they’re calling the National Endowment for the Oceans.

“For the first time, we will be giving back to our oceans,” Whitehouse said at Save The Bay’s headquarters. “We will be not just takers, but caretakers. We will be stewards of the oceans.”

The endowment would receive funding from a combination of sources, according to the senators’ proposal. Interest from the federal Oil Spill Liability Trust Fund would go toward the endowment as would 12.5 percent of revenues from oil and gas drilling on the Outer Continental Shelf and 12.5 percent of revenues generated by any offshore renewable-energy development. A portion of fines collected for oil- and gas-drilling violations would also be funneled into the endowment. The fund, which would be similar to the National Endowment for the Arts, would increase over time.

It would be administered by the secretary of commerce in consultation with other Cabinet members and federal officials. An advisory board would select projects to finance. They could include everything from studies of changing ocean temperatures to eelgrass restoration efforts, said Whitehouse. In Rhode Island, the beneficiaries could be the nonprofit advocacy group Save The Bay, the Coastal Resources Management Council and the University of Rhode Island.

One key goal of the fund is to increase the pace of scientific research so it can keep up with climate change.

“Changes are outrunning the pace of science,” Whitehouse said. “Your data is becoming obsolete so quickly.”

Ocean experts have long pushed for the creation of a permanent source of funding for marine studies and conservation. Robert Ballard, the famed ocean explorer and president of the Ocean Exploration Trust, gave a recorded message in favor of the endowment on Thursday. Others who spoke in support were Save The Bay executive director Jonathan Stone; Janet Coit, state director of The Nature Conservancy; Michael Keyworth, head of the Rhode Island Marine Trades Association; and representatives of URI’s Graduate School of Oceanography.

“For too long, we’ve taken our oceans for granted,” said David Farmer, dean of the graduate school. “Life begins in the oceans and life depends on the oceans.”

Whitehouse said the legislation should be received positively in Congress because of the increased attention about the marine environment caused by the Gulf oil spill. The fact that the fund would use existing revenue sources and not require any new taxes should also count in its favor.

“It’s in a good position, but it is a very challenging environment in Washington,” he said. “I don’t want to forecast any outcomes at this point.”

After the news conference, Whitehouse took a boat out to a monitoring site with Murray, Stone and Save The Bay’s Narragansett baykeeper, John Torgan.

Early Thursday morning, Torgan took readings in the area just south of Save The Bay’s offices at Fields Point and found that the oxygen content at the bottom had plummeted to zero. After rains last month and the current heat wave, conditions are ripe for a fish kill similar to one that occurred in Greenwich Bay seven years ago.

The monitoring done by Torgan and Murray is used to help find ways to prevent such ecological disasters and protect the state’s waters. They said an ocean endowment would guarantee that their work goes on.

“It’s exactly the kind of support we need to continue this work on the front lines to protect the Bay,” Torgan said.

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