

Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse
American Association of Port Authorities 2013 Spring Conference
March 19, 2013

As prepared for delivery

Thank you, Evan. And thanks to Kurt and to all the members of AAPA for coming to Washington.

I represent the Ocean State, Rhode Island, where our way of life has always been tied to the sea. The ocean provides food for our table, and solace and an appreciation for the wonders of our planet. As a practical matter, my State's economy relies on Narragansett Bay and Rhode Island Sound for jobs in trade, fishing, boat and ship building, tourism, and soon, we hope, offshore wind energy.

Rhode Island's ports, like those throughout the country, are at the center of these activities, and I'm honored to have the chance to speak with you all today about some of the challenges and opportunities facing our oceans and coasts.

Port infrastructure is a key building block of our ocean economy, and in Rhode Island, I'm proud that our ports have been bright spots throughout our slow recovery.

Quonset Point is poised to surpass Los Angeles to become the sixth largest point of entry for automobile imports into the U.S. With the help of a TIGER grant, they have reinforced the pier and purchased a mobile crane, significantly increasing the port's capacity. These investments have positioned Quonset as a potential hub for the assembly of offshore wind turbines, which could mean hundreds of new jobs.

The Port of Providence will also soon receive two mobile cranes thanks to a TIGER grant. These new cranes, along with additional infrastructure upgrades, have positioned ProvPort to take advantage of expanding short-sea shipping.

Our approach to marine spatial planning has also proven an advantage for Rhode Island. The Rhode Island Ocean Special Area Management Plan, or SAMP as we call it, brings a balanced approach to the development and protection of our ocean-based resources. It has been held up as an example for coastal regions across the nation.

We must sensibly plan our use of coastal and offshore waters in a way that balances the competing needs of commerce, conservation, and recreation—not always an easy thing to do under existing regulatory regimes. More than twenty federal agencies oversee our marine industries, governing everything from fisheries to oil and gas leasing. In 2010, President Obama signed our first-ever National Ocean Policy, to improve communication

among agencies that govern and regulate our oceans and coasts, which should lead to greater regulatory efficiencies.

But in Congress, marine spatial planning has been unfairly criticized, with some calling it a way to zone the ocean or limit access, instead of a process to engage all stakeholders in a sustainable manner. Smart planning and cooperation are critical in the face of significant challenges bearing on our oceans and coasts—on ecosystems and industries. As regional planning bodies created by the National Ocean Policy are launched in your areas, I encourage you to be active in that process. If you, or others you work with, are skeptical of marine spatial planning, bring your concerns to the table. If you're not at the table, your voices cannot be heard.

Planning and cooperation are also at the heart of the first ever National Freight Plan that we established in the most recent highway bill to improve the efficiency of our freight system. Ports are an important segment in the flow of commerce, handling over 90 percent of international cargo, so it is critical that you stay involved as the Department of Transportation moves forward with the freight plan. This program also needs your valuable input to realize its potential.

AAPA brings an informed perspective to discussions in Congress around the Harbor Maintenance Trust Fund and aging port infrastructure. I sit on the Environment and Public Works Committee that tomorrow will mark up the Water Resources Development Act. That bill takes important steps towards ensuring that Harbor Maintenance Trust Fund dollars are used for their original intent, and that projects are properly prioritized. It may not go far enough for some of you, but it is a step in the right direction and will draw needed attention to the many needs and challenges at our ports.

And these challenges are only increasing.

Our oceans are facing the devastating effects of carbon pollution. There is widespread scientific consensus that human carbon pollution has contributed to increased average atmospheric temperatures. The oceans, too, warm—and expand. Snow, glaciers, and ice caps melt into the sea. And sea level is projected to rise between one and four feet by the end of the century.

As sea levels rise on all our shores, storms, waves, and tides wash ever higher against the coast, putting our coastal infrastructure at greater risk of storm surges, of flooding, and of erosion. Five million Americans live within four feet of the high tide line. There are real human consequences; Hurricane Sandy, I hope, reminded us of that.

While it is impossible to say specifically that climate change caused Superstorm Sandy, we know that warmer oceans; warmer, moister air; and higher sea level all add to the

number, power, and danger of these extreme storms; climate change “loads the dice” for such storms, and causes more damage to multi-billion dollar maritime industries like yours.

Excess carbon dioxide also gets absorbed into our oceans, and makes the oceans more acidic. Carbon pollution by humans has caused a nearly 30 percent increase in the acidity of the ocean.

Ocean acidification harms species like oysters, corals, and even the plankton that comprise the base of the ocean food chain—in which human kind is inextricably linked.

Finally, warmer seas also threaten sea life—and multi-billion dollar maritime industries here in our country like fishing. Look at the winter flounder in Narragansett Bay, where average water temperatures have increased by 4 degrees. The winter flounder catch is down 90 percent. Past overfishing had a role to play, but the stock’s ability to recover is made all the more difficult by that dramatic temperature change.

So, for my Ocean State, carbon pollution presents a triple whammy from the sea—higher seas and storm surges; more acidic seas; and warmer seas. I am committed to fighting the looming threat of carbon pollution.

When you consider the implications on our ocean-based industries—not to mention food security, national security, and biodiversity—we cannot ignore these changes in our oceans. I believe the Senate should be more active in creating certainty for the maritime industry and protecting ocean resources. But it can be challenging for these issues to get the attention they deserve.

That’s why I drew together a bipartisan group of Senators to form a Senate Oceans Caucus to undertake the difficult challenge of finding common ground on issues facing the oceans and coasts. In coastal states, our constituents, our infrastructure, and our natural resources all face issues that may not be priorities for our land-locked colleagues.

The Caucus can raise the profile of these issues within the Senate and promote creative, bipartisan policy solutions that protect our oceans, our coasts, and the people and economies that rely on them. AAPA participated in a briefing hosted by the Caucus last year, highlighting current challenges and successes of the maritime industry.

I have also introduced legislation to create a National Endowment for the Oceans. The Endowment would provide a reliable stream of funding for research, like cooperative fisheries research, for restoration of critical habitat, and for relocation of critical public infrastructure at risk from rising sea levels and storm surges. And overall, the Endowment would support jobs in critical maritime industries.

The ocean provides us with great bounty, and we will continue to take advantage of this bounty, as we should. We will trade, we will fish, and we will sail. We will dispose of waste. We will extract fuel and harness the wind. We will put pressure on our oceans. Navies and cruise ships, sailboats and supertankers, will plow their surface. We cannot undo that part of our relationship with the sea. What we can change is what we do in return. We can, for the first time, become stewards of our oceans—not just takers, but caretakers.

That's where you come in. As stakeholders in these vital decisions, your involvement, your support, and your ideas are essential ingredients in the hard work of forging responsible policy solutions.

Thank you again for doing your part. I look forward to working with you to ensure the health and prosperity of our ports and our coastal economy.

Thank you very much.