The Request: Fund the Operations and Maintenance (O&M) costs for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s (NOAA) Physical Oceanographic Real-Time System (PORTS®) program to maintain the current PORTS installations and to expand the system. The average annual PORTS appropriation is $5 million, an increase of $10 million would fund the annual O&M costs of the national PORTS program. By increasing PORTS funding to a total of $15 million in FY20 this critical program will be able to continue seamlessly. This appropriations increase would fund all presently approved PORTS sensors, including three new PORTS suites (Kings Bay, GA, Coos Bay, OR and Honolulu, HI) and modernize all present and planned PORTS. This appropriations increase would also allow NOAA to fund their newly approved Precision Navigation projects on the Lower Mississippi River and New York/New Jersey.

The Need: According to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers’ Institute for Water Resources report for Calendar Year 2016 titled, Waterborne Commerce of the United States, the state of Louisiana is the leading tonnage state for waterborne commerce. According to this report, Louisiana is responsible for the movement of 545,103 short tons of cargo and the national total is 2,292,044 short tons. Ports are key to the U.S. economy and huge job creators, nearly 300,000 jobs in Louisiana are directly supported by our ports and waterways.

Mississippi River Ship Channel (MRSC): The Lower Mississippi River PORTS sensors were originally installed after the impact of Hurricane Katrina and based on a safety matrix developed by local navigation representatives, to install air gap sensors on the two southern most bridges across the Mississippi River, two current meters and an electronic river stage meter. The PORTS sensors are critical to navigational safety on the five deep-draft ports situated along the MRSC comprising the Lower Mississippi River Deep-Draft Ports Complex specifically the ports of: Baton Rouge, South Louisiana, New Orleans, St. Bernard and Plaquemines – along 256 miles of the Ship Channel (Baton Rouge to the Gulf of Mexico). This Ports Complex is a true economic superhighway transited by 7,500 oceangoing vessels with over 500,000 barge movements. Over 60% of the nation’s grain exports and 20% of the nation’s coal exports annually transit the MRSC.

The End Result: The additional $10 million in FY20 funding would allow NOAA to accomplish four major objectives necessary to ensure PORTS remains viable:

- Reduce the maintenance backlog on existing equipment;
- Modernize equipment to a consistent, current platform across the nation;
- Expand and upgrade PORTS services; and
- Resolve inconsistent funding of PORTS operations and maintenance costs.
The Rationale: The O&M costs for the PORTS program has been funded by a variety of different agreements with local sponsors that have historically placed the PORTS sensors in jeopardy of being deactivated. The current PORTS funding scheme should be modified to instill confidence and longevity to the end users that the sensors will remain available. The complexity of the funding hampers the potential benefits of the system, the PORTS sensors are federally funded and allow NOAA to develop the program, maintain the database and perform quality assurance while expecting private partners (almost always entities engaged in maritime commerce) to fund annual O&M costs.

Congress has recognized these difficulties and, in both legislative and appropriations report language, strongly encouraged NOAA to request funding that covers the full costs of PORTS. Through the Hydrographic Services Improvement Act of 1998, NOAA was encouraged to “design, install, maintain, and operate real-time hydrographic monitoring systems to enhance navigation safety and efficiency.” The Hydrographic Services Improvement Act of 1998 created NOAA’s Federal Advisory Committee the Hydrographic Services Review Panel (HSRP).

Conclusion: Consistent funding for the PORTS program and increased funding for the Operations and Maintenance costs of the PORTS system must be included in the NOAA federal budget.

The following quote is reproduced from a position paper (attached and clickable below) as issued by the Hydrographic Services Review Panel and titled:

PORTS®: Critical Data for Critical Decisions in U.S. Ports and Harbors

“Increased use of the Nation’s waterways in the movement of good and people in all major U.S. ports and harbors is becoming more complex as:

- vessels are becoming larger;
- waterway congestion is increasing;
- security arrangements are becoming more stringent;
- climate change is forcing a need of for resiliency planning;
- newly dredged channels are creating new hydraulic and bathymetric challenges;
- restricted waterways require precise data for safe navigation; and
- data needs to be made available on-shore, aboard ship, and on numerous devices.”

Please work to support maritime commerce and promote navigational safety by funding the O&M costs for NOAA’s PORTS® program.

Sincerely,

Sean M. Duffy, Sr.
Executive Director