

PHYSICAL OCEANOGRAPHIC REAL-TIME SYSTEM A Funding Crisis

The Issue: Funding for the Physical Oceanographic Real-Time System (PORTS®) is inadequate to maintain the current PORTS installations and to expand the system as needed.

By increasing PORTS funding an additional \$10 million, raising the annual appropriation to \$15 million in FY20 resolves the issue. The Maritime Exchange for the Delaware River and Bay and the American Association of Port Authorities request this increase on behalf of maritime stakeholders throughout the U.S.

The Need: That the nation's seaports and harbors are safe, resilient, and secure is absolutely essential. Our ports are an economic engine that drives American jobs, links U.S. growers and manufacturers to the world marketplace, and engenders a healthy economy. A recent study found that ocean cargo activity accounts for approximately 26 percent of the U.S. economy, generating nearly \$5 trillion in total economic activity and more than \$321 billion in federal, state and local taxes.¹

PORTS is an indispensable tool in the navigation toolbox. PORTS serves a multitude of users, such as municipal planners, private and public (federal, state, and local) response organizations, academia, and water resource agencies. This NOAA system also provides invaluable services to our nation's waterway users — including real-time environmental observations, forecasts, and other geospatial information, such as water levels and temperatures, currents, salinity, atmospheric pressure, and wind — that inform vessel owner/operator and mariner decisions about ship transit times, safe under-keel and air draft clearances, and cargo loading capacity, among others.

On The Delaware: NOAA's PORTS program is a critical piece of the Delaware River Basin's navigation and safety infrastructure, and has been operational on the Delaware River since 1998.

The system's value as a decision-support tool that improves safety, efficiency, and coastal resource management is unparalleled. Mariners rely on PORTS to plan for and during transits, allowing them to act based on actual vs. predicted tide and weather conditions, especially critical given that the Delaware is a tidal river. The system supports coastal resource protection, municipal and county waterway planning, and drinking water resource management.

Further, PORTS helps protect five bridges, the Cape May Lewes Ferry, and other critical infrastructure against spills, collisions, and allisions.

Finally, the system is a key factor in our port's competitive standing, regional jobs, and revenues, as our ability to attract and retain customers depends heavily on maintaining an exemplary safety record.

¹ Source: American Association of Port Authorities

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 across the nation (presently, some ports are funding these costs to varying degrees to include cost-sharing, an impractical, untenable, and unsustainable approach as there is not often a readily identifiable and isolated beneficiary).

The Rationale: The current PORTS funding scheme is varied and complex; it relies on federal dollars for system development, database maintenance, and quality assurance and expects undefined partners (usually maritime industry only) to fund operations and maintenance. Thus it is extremely vulnerable to the vagaries of partner budgets. When maintenance funds are not forthcoming, faulty equipment is neither repaired nor replaced, jeopardizing the ability of all system users to complete their missions.

Congress has recognized these difficulties and, in both legislative and appropriations report language, has 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.”

Conclusion: Consistent and ongoing funding for PORTS must be included in the NOAA budget. It is well past time to act to resolve this perpetual funding shortfall; all waterway users must be assured of reliable federal funding for the installation, operation, and maintenance of PORTS. An additional \$10 million in FY20 funding allows NOAA to provide indispensable PORTS services throughout the country.

Given PORTS’ far-reaching benefits and diverse array of beneficiaries, the \$15 million more than pays for itself in any given year.