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New funding may come for local ocean researchers

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(Published: Friday, February 15, 2008)

WASHINGTON - For the last dozen years, an ocean research platform made up of sensors and torpedo-shaped robots has floated three miles off the coast of Tuckerton.

The platform, which is named LEO-15 because it is a long-term ecosystem observatory 15 meters deep, aids the nation in environmental management, coastal education, search and rescue and homeland security.

"It is the model for what the rest of the national system is based off of," said Mike De Luca, senior associate director for Rutgers University's Institute of Marine and Coastal Sciences, which operates the platform.

But two years ago, representatives from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, or NOAA, told LEO-15's operators it could no longer afford to fund its maintenance.

However, if a bill passed by the House of Representatives on Wednesday night is made law, LEO-15 could receive the funding it needs to stay afloat.

This bill, H.R. 1834, which was sponsored by U.S. Rep. Jim Saxton, R-3rd, was approved 352-49 and, if made law, would authorize more than \$289 million over seven years for research, exploration and surveying and then another \$164 million for science, education and technology.

Two of NOAA's coastal research programs - the Ocean Exploration Program and the National Undersea Research Program - would benefit from an annual stipend meant to promote the expansion of ocean exploration.

"Discovery awaits us in the depths of the seas," said Saxton, a senior member of the House's Natural Resources Committee, in a news release. "Exciting prospects of finding therapeutic value, unknown species and maritime history lie on the ocean floor. This bill helps universities, marine expeditions and other researchers to go find them. The oceans keep many secrets about the past, but they may contain some for the future, as well."

The Press reported in 2005 that LEO-15 cost roughly \$1.2 to \$1.3 million each year for operations and research.

De Luca said the platform provides benefits including:

- n Assistance managing and understanding fishery stocks and water quality.

- n The monitoring of various issues that greatly impact the ocean's waters and habitat.

- n The providing science students with a real-time video, via the Internet, of what is happening in the ocean at any given moment.

While LEO-15 would likely benefit from the bill's funding, De Luca said it wouldn't be the only thing.

De Luca, who was in Washington on Thursday as part of his own attempt to gather funds for LEO-15, said there many important areas close to the shore that scientists still don't have very good maps of, due to a lack of funding.

One of these relatively unexplored areas is the Hudson Submarine Canyon, which sits about 10,000 feet below sea level a few hundred miles offshore of the coasts of New York and New Jersey.

"Rutgers has made a few missions to the canyon over the years and every time we go, we learn something new about its geography and its habitat," said De Luca, adding the canyon houses an array of transatlantic sub cables, is frequented whale populations and is a popular fishing destination. "But there is still much more we need to know about it, because it may even merit special protection for future generations."

Last year, the U.S. Senate passed a bill to fund ocean exploration that was similar the one the House of Representatives passed. However, before either bill can move forward De Luca said, the differences between the two bills must be ironed out.

"Even then, the bill is only an authorization for these agencies to spend a certain amount of money on ocean exploration," De Luca said. "It is not a guarantee that they will."

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