

OPENING REMARKS BY THE GENERAL COUNSEL

February 23, 2011

Thank you all for coming. It is my pleasure to welcome you to this year's NOAA General Counsel awards ceremony. With a year of NOAA under my belt, the value of our excellent staff is more impressive, and the opportunity to recognize our work through these awards seems even more important than it did last year.

I am really delighted to have the opportunity to present these awards today. It goes with the territory that so much of what we do as lawyers and staff supporting lawyers involves problems - difficult issues, unhappy alternatives, angry constituents. By contrast, this is an opportunity to say thank you to many people whose outstanding work has done so much for NOAA and for our country. We recognize today the great importance and value of public service for our nation's government - a government that does important work for the American people. Thank you for your talents. Thank you for your commitment. Thank you for your excellence.

Today I want to take a moment to make the case for our nation's government especially at a time when critics may say "government is the problem, not the solution." In a graduation speech last spring at the University of Michigan, President Obama was eloquent on the topic:

"But what troubles me is when I hear people say that all of government is inherently bad. One of my favorite signs from the health care debate was one that read "Keep Government Out Of My Medicare," which is essentially like saying "Keep Government Out Of My Government-Run Health Care." For when our government is spoken of as some menacing, threatening foreign entity, it conveniently ignores the fact that in our democracy, government is us. We, the people, hold in our hands the power to choose our leaders, change our laws, and shape our own destiny".

“Government is the police officers who are here protecting us and the service men and women who are defending us abroad. Government is the roads you drove in on and the speed limits that kept you safe. Government is what ensures that mines adhere to safety standards and that oil spills are cleaned up by the companies that caused them.

Government is this extraordinary public university - a place that is doing life-saving research, catalyzing economic growth, and graduating students who will change the world around them in ways big and small.

“The truth is, the debate we've had for decades between more government and less government doesn't really fit the times in which we live. We know that too much government can stifle competition, deprive us of choice, and burden us with debt. But we've also seen clearly the dangers of too little government - like when a lack of accountability on Wall Street nearly led to the collapse of our entire economy.

“So what we should be asking is not whether we need a "big government" or a "small government," but how we can create a smarter, better government. In an era of iPods and Tivo, where we have more choices than ever before, government shouldn't try to dictate your lives. But it should give you the tools you need to succeed. Our government shouldn't try to guarantee results, but it should guarantee a shot at opportunity for every American who's willing to work hard.

“The point is, we can and should debate the role of government in our lives, but remember, as you are asked to meet the challenges of our time, that the ability for us to adapt our government to the needs of the age has helped make our democracy work since its inception.”

We at NOAA certainly know the importance of government -- to assure that our fisheries are well-managed so there are fish for our children and grandchildren and those of our nation's commercial and recreational fishers; to measure and tell the weather so that we can save lives and property; to establish and protect marine sanctuaries and essential fish habitat and other special areas so that the world can see our special places and resources; to enforce our natural

resource laws so that people have an incentive to act to protect those resources; to respond to oil spills and hopefully to prevent them so the communities and ecosystems and jobs that depend on these resources can be better recovered and protected. Each of you -- every day and in every way -- is committed to this work and these goals for the American people.

Today, we give awards to recognize the work that is "our government." As you will see, we are recognizing the work of attorneys and staff within NOAA, and individuals who work for our client offices and outside of NOAA. This makes clear that the achievements of NOAA/GC are not done in a vacuum. Contributions of our partners in no small measure contribute to the success of this office.

Finally, while this ceremony acknowledges the achievements of a few, I also take a moment to acknowledge the outstanding work done by all of you on behalf of NOAA and our nation. I appreciate the incredible work you all do to help build strong, sustainable fisheries, protect endangered species, prosecute illegal activity, clean up oil spills, safeguard marine sanctuaries, protect our coasts, and facilitate timely and accurate weather forecasts. You should be proud of the truly excellent work you do.

And with that, let's begin the presentation of the NOAA General Counsel awards for work done in 2010.

Our MC for this year's program is Marilou Shanefelt, whose incredible persistence and work in putting together today's excellent program we should all recognize with a round of applause. Marilou.

CLOSING REMARKS BY THE GENERAL COUNSEL

That concludes the presentation of this year's NOAA General Counsel's Office awards. I congratulate each of the recipients, and express my heartfelt appreciation for your significant contributions to the success of our mission.

Thanks to everyone for coming to help us celebrate these achievements. And now, please join us for our celebratory luncheon in the NOAA Science Center across the Hall.