

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

December 17, 2014

## VIA ELECTRONIC TRANSMISSION

The Honorable Todd J. Zinser  
Inspector General  
U.S. Department of Commerce  
1401 Constitution Avenue, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20230

Dear Inspector General Zinser:

We have been contacted by two whistleblowers who allege that they were sexually assaulted, harassed, and discriminated against by National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) employees and contractors while conducting research on behalf of universities aboard NOAA research vessels. The whistleblowers also allege that NOAA staff is not properly trained to handle these reports from individuals in their situation.

Moreover, the whistleblowers allege that, under the current system of reporting, students and scientists are directed to report their allegations through a chain that can include the alleged perpetrators themselves: first, to the chief scientist on board; who then informs the captain or NOAA. In addition, the whistleblowers claim that this reporting method is not in any way objective or confidential.

In fact, one whistleblower claims that her report to the Office of National Marine Sanctuaries was distributed to a group that included the alleged perpetrator, the captain of her boat. The other whistleblower alleges that she was harassed by her chief scientist and a colleague; as a result, she claims that she did not even bother reporting to her captain.

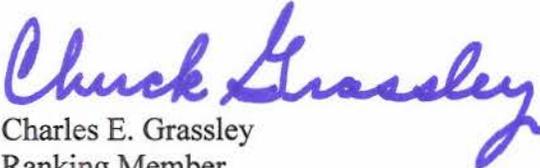
The underlying allegations of abuse in these cases include: multiple instances of unwanted touching, sexually suggestive comments, and the subsequent, forced sharing of sleeping quarters with the alleged abuser as a condition of research. In the case involving the chief scientist, the whistleblower alleges that she was told that she had been filmed in the shower and that this footage was being broadcast over the Internet as pornography.

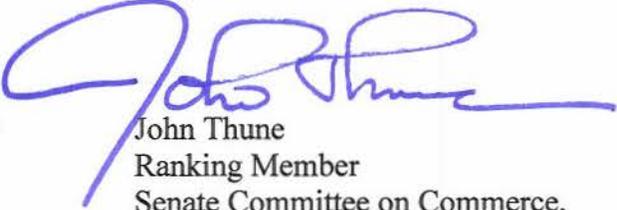
In the other case, the whistleblower alleges that the captain, in addition to assaulting and harassing her, repeatedly dumped waste at sea in violation of federal regulations and even instructed crew to do so, so long as they could evade detection by NOAA. This captain was reportedly employed by a contractor, and not by NOAA. Despite reporting all of these allegations to NOAA, the whistleblower claims that NOAA refused to investigate whether any of these allegations could be substantiated as violations of law or as violations of the contract.

These are serious allegations that deserve your immediate attention. Accordingly, please contact Jay Lim of Senator Grassley's staff at (202) 224-5225 or Adrian Arnakis of Senator

Thune's staff at (202) 224-1251 to arrange interviews with each of these whistleblowers. Thank you for your cooperation in this important matter.

Sincerely,

  
Charles E. Grassley  
Ranking Member  
Senate Committee on the Judiciary

  
John Thune  
Ranking Member  
Senate Committee on Commerce,  
Science, and Transportation

Cc: The Honorable Penny Pritzker  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Commerce  
1401 Constitution Avenue, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20230