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RECOS Statement on the Ocean Observatories Initiative (OOI)

The [Research and Education Coalition for Ocean Sciences \(RECOS\)](#), composed of more than 20 of the nation's leading ocean scientific and educational institutions, has as one of its main pillars of interest the importance of ocean observations in supporting a resilient U.S. ocean economy, workforce training, and national security. RECOS is "collaboratively advocating for ocean science, technology, infrastructure, and education with a unified national voice."

As such, RECOS is troubled by the recent announcement from the National Science Foundation (NSF) that the in-water ocean sensors and other key infrastructure of the Ocean Observatories Initiative (OOI) will be removed over the coming year, as part of a "descope" process. OOI was built by the NSF approximately a decade ago at a cost of \$350-400M, and it plays a foundational role in gathering key, open-access data that informs our nation about many topics relevant to economic sustainability and safety such as fisheries, weather, storm intensity and frequency, underwater hazards, including volcanism and earthquakes, and ocean-atmosphere phenomena such as El Niño and the Atlantic Meridional Overturning Circulation, that impact society broadly.

In 2018, an earlier descope of some OOI-based assets also occurred, as part of NSF's response to an influential Decadal Survey report from the National Academies for Science, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM), titled "[Sea Change: The 2015-2025 Decade of Ocean Science](#)". The descope, which was approved by the National Science Board, occurred only after considerable community engagement and discussion. This had a strongly positive impact on science and technology grants by the NSF, as the funds from the 2018 descope were retained by the NSF's Geosciences Directorate/Division of Ocean Sciences to increase support to the scientific community. The current decision to descope in 2026 appears to have been made without similar community engagement, and it is unclear whether the financial savings that result from the descope will benefit other aspects of the ocean science and technology portfolio.

NSF has stated that this 2026 descope is due "*...in part to recommendations of the science community outlined in the more recent NASEM Decadal Survey "[Forecasting the Ocean: The 2025-2035 Decade of Ocean Science](#)."* This interpretation, however, does not provide the context of the NASEM committee's recommendation. This recommendation indeed stressed the importance of ocean observations, and recommended that the NSF "*...conduct a revisioning and restructuring exercise for the future of the OOI...*" that "*...should occur as a fully separate activity from the usual*



renewal/recompete discussions” and “... would provide a timely path forward for the next iteration of OOI that takes advantage of strategic partnerships, the evolution of ocean sciences and technological capabilities over the two decades since the OOI was originally conceived...” (Report Recommendation 4.2).

Accordingly, RECOS calls upon NSF to consider pausing their descope and to initiate an expedited and independent review process for revisioning and restructuring the program in collaborative partnership with scientific and technological community leaders to fulfill the independent and sound advice from the National Academies. Such review could consider OOI within the wider array of U.S. ocean observing assets supported by the NSF and other agencies (e.g., NOAA), and OOI’s future role - or lack thereof – in this federal suite of assets. This approach will ensure that U.S. national security, economic prosperity, and maritime leadership remain intact during the review process, and reinforce NSF’s role as an independent world leading research agency.

About RECOS

The Research and Education Coalition for Ocean Sciences (RECOS) is a consortium of U.S academic institutions, nonprofits, and aquaria advocating for ocean science, technology, infrastructure, and education. Learn more about RECOS at theoceancoalition.org