Sometimes what isn't news is as revealing as what is. Last week, the Joint Ocean Commission Initiative, a bipartisan effort to improve U.S. national ocean policy, issued a new report titled Charting the Course: Securing the Future of America's Oceans. The Initiative is led by a distinguished group of policy and science experts — its co-chairs are William Ruckelshaus, administrator of EPA under both Nixon and Reagan, and Norman Mineta, former member of Congress and cabinet secretary in both Republican and Democratic administrations. As essentially the successor to the Pew Oceans Commission and the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy, the Initiative has been a leading voice on ocean policy since its establishment in 2005. But its latest report has hardly made a ripple.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not criticizing either the Initiative or its report, which makes a number of very sensible recommendations for a stronger federal role in ocean policy. You might think those recommendations would be both powerful and important, especially since they would seem to fit right in with what the Obama Administration has claimed as a key initiative, improving national ocean policy. (We've blogged about the administration's ocean policy initiatives here, here, and here.) Nonetheless, I think the media has it right this time — the report is not news, because its recommendations are neither new nor (unfortunately) likely to produce policy action. The report calls for increased federal funding for ocean management and ocean-related research, increased federal support for state ocean planning efforts, and for the Senate to ratify the Law of the Sea Convention. All suggestions this group has made before, most recently in its 2012 U.S. Ocean Policy Report Card. There's no harm in trying to keep the pressure on the Obama Administration to fulfill its stated ocean policy goals. But the Administration can't unilaterally take the steps called for in this report, and its exceedingly unlikely that the current Congress will agree to do so.

Meanwhile, global developments underline the need for the U.S. to put a higher priority on oceans policy. More and more countries are showing interest in the Arctic. At its meeting last month, the Arctic Council accepted applications for permanent observer status from six nations, including China and India. Although observers don't have a vote in the Council and have agreed not to challenge the resource ownership claims of arctic nations, they clearly hope to influence the pace and direction of the coming "coldrush," as climate change is anticipated to make arctic resources increasingly accessible. Who knows, maybe as US arctic interests come under greater pressure nationalism will prove a stronger inducement for moving forward on oceans policy than environmentalism or globalization.