

UNOLS Fall 2025 Council Meeting Summary

Meeting 13 November 2025 – Embassy Suites Hotel, Alexandria, VA

Fleet Recapitalization and a Fleet Renewal Plan

There is a pressing need for a master Fleet Renewal Plan for the ARF that considers all science needs and has a multi-decade horizon to account for renewal and maintenance. This would present the scientific community's description of what scientists need to enable science, support technology innovation, create a STEM-literate workforce, and build a robust American capacity for securing ocean intelligence.

AGORs are an important part of that, but so are things like Antarctic Research Vessel (ARV), a drillship, high-energy seismic, and regional/coastal vessels. The goal wouldn't be to tell federal agencies HOW to support this -- the goal would be to define what's needed over the long term. Noting that a long-term plan for a fleet of ships might allow us to engage shipyards as supporters, because they would be able to see long-term benefit as opposed to a couple of one-off ships. The group agreed that broad stakeholder engagement would be valuable, though they also discussed the need to balance this with focused decision-making. The Council suggested forming an ad-hoc committee comprised of UNOLS committee members as well as outside experts to create this plan. This plan would go to federal partners, congressional delegates and RECOS.

Further discussion included:

- Focus beyond Navy - The maritime dominance goes beyond the Navy – it includes transportation and shipping too.
- We could broaden the discussion to see what all the agencies need (DOE, DOD, USCG)
- Engaging the SOST which was noted has not met since January.

There were discussions around the fact that with current executive orders regarding shipbuilding, the scientific community may have an opportunity to build ships now, and that timeliness may be key to be ready on relatively short notice. The Government Shipbuilders Council was discussed which is a council that includes Navy, Army and Department of Defense; the Coast Guard, which falls under the Department of Homeland Security; the Maritime Administration, which falls under the Department of Transportation; and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, which is part of the Department of Commerce.

ACTION: Further work to create an Ad-Hoc working group to create a Fleet Renewal Plan which will include ALL ships, not just globals.

Supporting Polar Research

The Council discussed broadening AICC to be bipolar rather than Arctic-centric (i.e. Polar Science Coordinating Committee). This would provide a voice to Antarctic/Southern Ocean scientists who currently lack a coordination mechanism. Part of this could also facilitate discussions of bringing ARV into the ARF.

The group recognized that any new Global / Ocean Class ships need to meet the Polar Code so that they can operate in Polar Regions when ice conditions permit. This has been highlighted as non-ice classed research vessels (i.e. Roger Revelle, Thomas G. Thompson, Neil Armstrong) have operated in Polar waters to support funded science. Science Mission Requirements require updating to include this.

It was noted that there may be possibilities to barter with other nations who work in the Antarctic.

ACTION: Alice will reach out to Amy Leventer, Carlos Moffett, and several others to introduce the idea.

ACTION: Draft a 1-pager to describe that icebreakers need to be dedicated to science as primary / sole missions, as opposed to being piggybacked on USCG ships that have national security as their main mission.

Advocating for science

There was further discussion about advocating for the fleet. It was stressed that we need a clear message about what we need as a community and then making sure that we are consistent with that message. Since ship-building is now a priority for this administration, it was suggested that we talk to ship yards to make sure they know of the fleet's needs.

ACTION: Continue to work on a clear concise message and spread this message so that everyone is singing from the same sheet of music.

ACTION: UNOLS and RECON start a conversation with shipyards to garner support for the fleet recapitalization plan when completed.

Safer Seas Act Update

The discussion centered on the Safer Seas Act (SSA) and the need to increase communication regarding the use of onboard cameras and microphones. Ideas included adding information about the Safer Seas Act to the MFP Participant Portal, making sure posted signs are in

high-visibility areas like the galley, cabins, and hallways. It was noted that since this is USCG mandated, all training and acknowledgment records are subject to annual review, requiring operators to formally demonstrate that the necessary training has been successfully administered.

ACTION: UNOLS office will work with the operators to add information regarding the Safer Seas Act to the Participant Portal of MFP

ACTION: Operators will continue to spread the word to try to dispel misinformation.

Investigating Shipboard Harassment

Sarah Fuller / WHOI discussed WHOI's effort to better understand who is responsible for investigating harassment issues. The group discussed harassment policies and procedures, with Sarah presenting on the complexity of handling such cases across different institutions. They agreed to further explore how to address harassment, including potentially developing clearer guidelines for operators and investigators.

ACTION: Put together a working group to look deeper into this issue.

Safety Committee – Alcohol/Drug Policy Review

There was discussion of drug use on research vessels, particularly concerning zero-tolerance policies and the challenges of enforcing them. The conversation highlighted the need for a consistent, fleet-wide approach to drug policies, with input from legal and safety perspectives. Ship operators and Safety Committee to review Research Vessel Safety Standards and institutional drug and alcohol policies as well as pre-cruise familiarization process to ensure sailors and science parties are very clear on the zero-tolerance policies.

ACTION: Safety Committee will review the RVSS Alcohol and Controlled Substance text and suggest updates to tighten up the language.

Extending Council Term Length

There was discussion from the Council that a 3 year term might not be long enough and it takes new Council members 1-2 years to simply understand what is going on. Over the next year, the Council will discuss this in full and if necessary, suggest new verbiage for the Charter. Additionally, the UNOLS office will continue providing robust "UNOLS on-boarding" familiarization for new committee members and others who are new to the community. This is in hopes of educating new committee members on the UNOLS Community and getting them up to speed faster.

ACTION: Further discussion within Council

ACTION: UNOLS Office will set a date for an On-Boarding in early 2026

UNOLS Membership Criteria Revision

The Council discussed revising the UNOLS charter language regarding membership criteria, with two options proposed: either expanding the definition to include academic or research programs in marine, geological, biological, and earth system sciences, or clarifying that it could be an academic or research program. The Great Lakes institutions supported the first option to better include Great Lakes institutions. This topic will be further discussed throughout the year with language drafted if necessary.

Concern was raised that vessels from UNOLS Member institutions might be wrongly associated with the ARF. The UNOLS office agreed to review the website language around the “non-ARF Small Ship Inventory” and consider creating a UNOLS familiarization brief for new members.

ACTION: Further discussion within Council

Fleet Efficiency & Using the ARF for Commercial work

Ship operators to review potential opportunities for working together to more efficiently / more cost effectively procure common services and supplies with the intent to reduce fleet costs. There was also concern that using the ARF for commercial work is not as easy as it sounds with institutional and industry requirements. More discussion will be had about this topic.

ACTION: UNOLS Office will facilitate a meeting with operators to discuss possibilities.

Council Elections

- New Council Members – non-Op – Leila Hamdan/USM, At-Large – Angel White / UH
- Ballot Measures
 - New Charter language was approved to add an early career person to the AICC
 - Three new institutions were added as UNOLS Members – Dauphin Island Marine Lab / of Alabama, Monmouth University, Kent State University

Ron Brown Investigation

The investigation regarding the fire on the RON BROWN is complete. UNOLS asked if the report could be shared with UNOLS ship operators to aid in reviewing their operations to ensure any similar potential causes of the fire can be prevented.

ACTION: NOAA to share the RON BROWN report with the UNOLS office who will distribute