

UNOLS 2026 Spring Council Meeting - Day One

Day 1 – Meeting Minutes (Draft)

Date: Tuesday, April 28, 2026 and Wednesday, April 29 2026

Location: Roger F. Wicker Center for Ocean Enterprise, University of Southern Mississippi (USM), Gulfport, MS

Format: In-person with Zoom participation

Agenda Time Zone: Central Time (CT)

1. Call to Order, Welcome, and Code of Conduct

Actual start: Meeting start delayed (~30–45 minutes) due to audiovisual and Zoom setup issues.

- **Chair:** Bruce Appelgate (SIO)
 - The Chair formally opened the meeting and reviewed the **UNOLS Code of Conduct**, emphasizing respectful, inclusive participation.
 - **USM Welcome:**
 - Delivered by **Leila Hamden**, Associate VP for Research, USM.
 - Overview of USM's Gulf Coast research enterprise, including:
 - ~450 ocean scientists across multiple research centers.
 - Highest concentration of oceanographers per mile of coastline globally.
 - Introduction to the **Roger F. Wicker Center for Ocean Enterprise** (opened 2023).
 - Safety, evacuation routes, restrooms, lactation room, Wi-Fi, and breakout spaces reviewed.
 - Noted the recent passing of Dr. Gordon Cannon, who envisioned the center.
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2. Participant Introductions

Actual timing: Late morning (significantly delayed from agenda)

- Introductions conducted for:
 - In-person Council members
 - Federal agency representatives
 - Committee chairs
 - Online participants
 - Strong participation from **NSF Geosciences Directorate**, ONR, NOAA, and UNOLS committees.
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3. Federal Agency Reports

3.1 National Science Foundation (NSF)

Presenter: Rose Dufour (NSF)

Key updates:

- **Leadership:** President nominated **Jim O’Neal** as NSF Director; nomination pending Senate confirmation (as of April 2026).
- **Reorganization:**
 - All NSF facilities, including the Academic Research Fleet (ARF), consolidated under the new **Office of Research Infrastructure (ORI)**.
 - ARF maintains close coordination with Ocean Sciences via weekly cross-directorate meetings.
- **OMB Key Performance Indicators (KPIs):**
 - NSF required to report a **single quarterly KPI**.
 - Proposed metric: **percentage of science objectives accomplished**, rather than days-at-sea.
 - Relies on accurate and timely **Post-Cruise Assessment Reports (PCARs)**.
- **Budget pressures:**
 - Rising fuel costs could create a **\$5–6M operations shortfall**.
 - High turnover among marine superintendents noted.
- **Capital planning:**
 - \$1M authorized to scope a **midlife refit for R/V Sikuliaq**.

Discussion:

- Strong support for science-completion metrics over operational-only metrics.
 - Emphasis on compliance with PCAR submissions.
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3.2 Office of Naval Research (ONR)

Presenter: Rob Sparrock (ONR)

Highlights:

- Navy FY27 budget now explicitly references **academic research vessels** (~\$20M).
 - UNOLS fleet maintains ~90% operational readiness compared to ~70% Navy average.
 - Long-term outlook:
 - Several AGORs approaching or beyond midlife within 15–20 years.
 - No explicit AGOR replacement plan in current Navy 30-year shipbuilding documents.
 - ONR shifting toward:
 - Greater **industry partnerships**
 - Reduced direct funding of basic research where industry can lead.
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3.3 National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA)

Presenter: Rachel Pryor (NOAA)

Key points:

- **R/V Ronald H. Brown:**
 - Fire recovery and overhaul ongoing.
 - Return to service **no later than April 2027**.
 - ~\$9M cost impacting FY26 operations.
 - **New vessels:**
 - *Oceanographer*: Delivery now expected **May 2027**.
 - *Discoverer*: Expected **November 2027**, with potential additional delays.
 - Class B vessels: *Surveyor* (Oct 2028), *Navigator* (May 2029).
 - **Fleet utilization:**
 - FY27 planning at ~2,000 days-at-sea across 15 platforms (budget-driven).
 - **Workforce:**
 - 93 mariners hired in FY26; attrition reduced from 31% to ~7%.
 - **Chartering:**
 - New NOAA charter working group includes CFOs to address long-standing internal funding conflicts.
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4. Scheduling Update

Presenter: Doug Russell (UNOLS)

Summary:

- Scheduling highly dynamic due to:
 - Administration change
 - Budget uncertainty
 - R/V Brown casualty
 - FY26 and FY27 schedules published later than ideal.
 - NOAA now a major participant in UNOLS scheduling discussions.
 - Increasing coordination for **EEZ mapping** and interagency missions.
 - Days-at-sea trend declining (~3,000/year vs. ~3,200 previously).
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5. RECOS (Research & Education Coalition for Ocean Sciences)

Presenter: Debbie Bronk (Bigelow Lab)

Highlights:

- RECOS formed in 2024; now **26 member institutions**.
- Flat dues structure (\$10k/institution); pursuing 501(c)(3) status.
- Advocacy focus:
 - Fleet recapitalization
 - Workforce

- Economic and national security relevance
- Submitted ~\$5B fleet recapitalization memo to OMB:
 - 5–6 global vessels
 - 2 icebreakers
 - 1 drilling vessel
- Emphasis on **return-on-investment (ROI)** metrics for ships:
 - Jobs
 - Regional economic impact
 - National resilience
- ACTIONS:
 - APD - Add links to RECOS posters (from their website - to [UNOLS.org](https://unols.org) - DONE.)
 - ??? - Triage what went wrong with RCRVs
 - Focus on ROIs for fleet

Action requested:

UNOLS members asked to share existing economic impact or ROI studies.

6. Fleet Improvement Committee (FIC)

Presenter: Kipp Shearman (OSU)

Updates:

- Fleet Improvement Plan finalized; pending release.
 - AGU Town Hall survey results:
 - ~47% of respondents delayed fieldwork due to lack of global-class vessels.
 - 82% identified global vessels as critical to their science.
 - Coastal/local vessel survey:
 - Hulls generally adequate; gaps are primarily technological and systems-based.
 - Planning **Oceans-Class Science Mission Requirements Workshop** (Fall 2026).
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7. Chartering and Commercial Use of ARF Vessels

Presenter: Anita Lopez (University of Hawai'i)

Case study: Kilo Moana 90-day commercial charter (Tetra Tech)

Key issues identified:

- Existing NSF/ONR agreements designed only for federally funded academic research.
- Commercial charters introduce:
 - Legal ambiguity
 - Insurance and liability challenges
 - Major compliance burdens (contract expanded from 8 to 106 pages due to flow-downs).
- Significant administrative and institutional risk borne by operators.

Discussion:

- Broad agreement that current frameworks are misaligned with emerging funding realities.
- Consensus emerged on creating an **operator-led working group** to:
 - Develop standardized guidance
 - Advise agencies on policy updates
 - Reduce institutional risk

ACTION: RVOC should create a working group to develop a standard framework.

8. Vessel and Facility Updates (Selected Highlights)

- **Coastal Class Research Vessel (CCRV):**
 - Hydrogen-powered concept canceled when DOE funds withdrawn.
 - Pivot to diesel-electric design.
 - 6 shipyard bids received; contract award targeted by June 2026.
ACTION: FIC to get CCRV SMRs - Alice asked Zoltan for these.
- **Medium ROV (MROV) Program:**
 - Two systems funded (NSF/HUI and NOAA/USM).
 - 4,000 m rating, ~85–93% of Jason capability.
 - Designed for RCRVs and reduced crew via remote operations.
 - NSF unit expected available for science in **Q3 2027**.

9. Antarctic Vessel Operations Lessons Learned

9.1 R/V Roger Revelle

Joost van der Zwaag provided an overview of Antarctic operations involving **non-USAP vessels**, with particular attention to cruises conducted aboard **R/V Roger Revelle**. The presentation focused on operational readiness, logistical complexity, and challenges associated with Antarctic deployments outside the standard USAP vessel framework.

Key points included:

- **Operational Context**
 - The Roger Revelle was deployed to the Antarctic in support of major science programs, operating in challenging late-season ice conditions.
 - These operations required close coordination among ship operators, science teams, logistics planners, and international partners.
- **Environmental and Navigational Challenges**
 - Variable ice conditions, including large tabular icebergs and proliferating smaller ice fragments, significantly affected planned tracklines and station work.
 - Navigation relied heavily on integrating satellite ice imagery, updated bathymetry, and real-time decision making on the bridge.
 - In several areas, existing charts were outdated or insufficient for modern ice-navigation needs, requiring conservative operational choices.
- **Operational Flexibility**

- Science plans required ongoing adjustment to balance safety, fuel use, time on station, and ice avoidance.
 - Transit strategy and station sequencing were modified to optimize data return while minimizing risk.
 - **Lessons Identified**
 - Antarctic work on non-USAP platforms places additional demands on crews, bridge teams, and science leadership.
 - Improved access to up-to-date bathymetry and ice-aware navigation tools was highlighted as critical for future Antarctic operations.
 - The experience underscored the importance of conservative risk assessment and close coordination across institutions.
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9.2 R/V Sikuliaq

Doug Baird presented a complementary briefing focused on **operational and medical readiness considerations** for Antarctic cruises, using **R/V Sikuliaq** and other recent Antarctic deployments as reference cases.

Key points included:

- **Medical Screening and Risk Management**
 - Antarctic operations require enhanced pre-cruise medical screening due to extreme remoteness, limited medevac options, and extended response times.
 - Standards for Antarctic medical clearance are necessarily more stringent than for most temperate-latitude operations.
- **Variability Across Vessel Classes and Missions**
 - A contrast was drawn between Antarctic medical requirements and those applied to lower-risk regional or coastal cruises.
 - The need to strike an appropriate balance between ensuring safety and avoiding unnecessary barriers to student and early-career participation was emphasized.
- **Operational Decision-Making**
 - Masters retain authority to pause or modify scientific operations due to weather, fatigue, or safety concerns, which may be amplified in Antarctic settings.
 - Medical and safety considerations can directly affect science timelines and operational tempo in polar regions.
- **Discussion and Broader Implications**
 - The briefing stimulated discussion on whether UNOLS should continue refining **graduated medical standards** tied to operational risk rather than a one-size-fits-all approach.
 - Participants noted the importance of clearly communicating Antarctic-specific risks and requirements to science parties during pre-cruise planning.

ACTION: How do we get R2R bathy data to Antarctic - Alice asked Vicki

ACTION: Council to vote on the agreed language as to whether it should be in the charter.- Alice sent them a form.

10. Using the ARF Vessels for Seabed Characterization

- This topic was removed from the agenda as it was covered in the Schedule briefing
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11. UNOLS Charter Language Updates

Key discussion points included:

- The meeting focused on updates to UNOLS charter language regarding membership criteria and dues collection.
- The group discussed amending the membership requirement to remove the specific mention of "marine science" and instead reference "academic or research programs in relevant disciplines reliant on shipboard science or facilities."
- They also addressed the need to clarify dues collection authority by adding language to Section 5H of the charter, specifying that dues would be collected annually and could vary based on council approval and public posting of amounts.
- The discussion included concerns about ensuring proper standards for non-ARF ship operations and maintaining transparency in dues structure.

ACTION: Council to vote on the agreed language as to whether it should be in the charter.

ACTION: Post Annual Dues on website

ACTION: Alice work with Chrissy, Amy and Dan for "onboarding package" for new council and committee members - add acronyms

12. AMRCC Update

An update was provided on the activities and current focus areas of the **AMRCC**, with discussion centered on operational coordination, risk management, and fleet-wide consistency.

Key discussion points included:

- **Role of the AMRCC**
 - The AMRCC continues to serve as an advisory and coordination body addressing complex operational issues that cut across institutions, regions, or vessel classes.
 - The committee supports information sharing and alignment on best practices related to risk, readiness, and response.
- **Operational Environment**
 - Presenters noted that increasing mission complexity, extreme-environment operations, and heightened regulatory and security expectations are placing new demands on operators and crews.
 - The importance of shared situational awareness and proactive coordination was emphasized.
- **Medical Readiness and Risk Considerations**

- Discussion touched on the importance of appropriate medical screening and preparedness, particularly for high-risk or remote operations.
 - Participants reiterated the need for a risk-based approach that considers mission profile, operating area, and evacuation constraints rather than applying uniform standards across all cruises.
 - **Coordination with Other Committees and Programs**
 - The AMRCC update highlighted close coordination with ROVOC, the Safety Committee, and UNOLS staff on issues that intersect operations, safety, and compliance.
 - Communication pathways among operators were noted as particularly valuable during unusual or rapidly evolving situations.
 - **Discussion Themes**
 - Council members discussed the value of maintaining flexible frameworks that allow operators to respond to emerging risks while preserving scientific productivity.
 - The importance of lessons learned, shared experiences, and continued cross-fleet dialogue was emphasized.
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13. Broadening Federal Agency use of ARF Vessels

This topic was moved to the next meeting

14. Day One - Action Items

- **Marine Superintendents:** Ensure timely and complete PCAR submissions.
 - **RECOS / UNOLS members:** Provide examples of economic impact or ROI analyses.
 - **UNOLS Council:** Consider formal role in convening broader coalitions around fleet policy and recapitalization.
 - **NOAA:** Finalize recapitalization plan submission to OMB (target July 1).
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UNOLS Spring Meeting 2026 – Day Two

Day 2 – Meeting Minutes (Draft)

Date: Tuesday, April 28, 2026 and Wednesday, April 29 2026

Location: Roger F. Wicker Center for Ocean Enterprise, University of Southern Mississippi (USM), Gulfport, MS

Format: In-person with Zoom participation

Agenda Time Zone: Central Time (CT)

1. Opening & Housekeeping

- Welcome and logistics
 - Review of *Principles of Community / Ground Rules*
 - Introductions of new participants
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2. Incident Review

- **Roger Revelle Engine Room Fire Incident**
 - Overview of incident and response
 - Root cause analysis
 - Safety response and lessons learned
 - Impacts to science operations
 - Cost and operational implications
 - Q&A
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3. Data, Mapping, and Fleet Contributions

- **Mapping the Gaps: ARF Contributions to Global Ocean Mapping**
 - U.S. and global bathymetric gap analysis
 - ARF role in Seabed 2030 and GEBCO
 - Transit mapping and opportunistic data collection
 - Data stewardship pipeline (R2R, NOAA archives, GMRT)
 - Tools for identifying mapping gaps
 - Workforce development and capacity building
 - Q&A and discussion

ACTION: How to deal with GMRT in MFP - how do we show the field

ACTION: Help Vicki put together a useful Dashboard - get input from agencies and council

4. Safety Committee Update

- Safety Committee overview and membership updates
- Dive Safety Subcommittee status
- Updates to Research Vessel Safety Standards (RVSS)
 - Appendix A (Wire and Cable Terminations)
 - Appendix B (Overboard Handling Systems)

- Harassment prevention updates
- Upcoming Safety Meeting agenda highlights
- Emerging safety issues and near-miss reporting
- Discussion (including national security diversions and communications)

ACTION: Add Dan Ohnemus as Safety Committee Ex-Officio- Asked Bridget to do thi

ACTION: NSF interested in adding information to the pre-cruise planning about what the Chi Sci might see, shutting down comms, etc. Also to each participation - that they may need to go to National security issues.

5. Technical & Infrastructure Updates

- **5.1 RV Tech Program Update**
 - Community support activities
 - Training initiatives
 - Cyber infrastructure coordination

ACTION: APD - How is Wiki collaborating with MFP? - ALICE SENT EMAIL

ACTION: APD - Follow up with Dan O re CORIOLIX- ALICE SENT EMAIL

- **5.2 SATNAG Update**
 - Satellite communications and IT guidance
 - Cybersecurity coordination
- **5.3 SURF-IT / ARFSEC**
 - Shared IT support across fleet
 - Cybersecurity operations and compliance
- **5.4 Rolling Decks Repository (R2R)**
 - FAIR data initiatives
 - Expanded data product support

6. Advisory & Committee Updates

- **ROVOC Update**
 - Leadership transitions
 - Upcoming RVOC meeting overview
 - Fire incident discussions (Revelle, Ron Brown, Rainier)
 - Medical evaluations and pre-cruise policies
 - National security diversion considerations
 - Regulatory designation discussion (public vs commercial vessel status)

7. Workplace Conduct & Harassment Reporting

- **Research Vessel Harassment Reporting Best Practices**
 - Background and need
 - Relationship to Civility at Sea and RVSS

- Dual-reporting framework (USCG + institutional)
- Roles and responsibilities
- Reporting pathways and chain-of-command issues
- Multi-institution cruise scenarios
- Interim measures and victim support
- Discussion and community feedback

ACTION: Look into NOAA's Victims, Advocates, Liaison program - MERAS

ACTION: Update Module IIIs to make sure each poster has an anonymous reporting resource-
MERAS

ACTION: How can Chi Sci get training to have these conversations and be watching for these
situations - MERAS

ACTION: Follow up with Katie RE GEOspace (or something like that) - sort of field safe.- MERAS

8. Strategic Discussion

- **Telling the ARF Story**
 - Communicating fleet value to policymakers and the public
 - Outreach, branding, and messaging strategies
 - Integration with institutional and federal efforts
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9. Wrap-Up & Action Items

- Action items and follow-up
- 2026 Annual Meeting:
 - Tentative dates - Not 12, 13 in TAMU due to Football game
 - Location options
 - Keynote speaker ideas - SODCO - Match Malone? Or someone with policy expertise? Or someone from NOAA if we go to DC?
- Council leadership transition (Chair-Elect nominations)
- Closing remarks and adjournment

ACTION: Set dates, location and keynote for Annual meeting
