

Testimony of an anonymous NOAA scientist

Submitted to the House Natural Resources Committee's Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations for the hearing: *Examining Opportunities to Improve Prevention and Response of Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration*

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Chairman Cox, Ranking Member Gohmert, and members of the Committee: thank you for inviting me to submit my testimony.

I have been a sea-going scientist for the NOAA National Marine Fisheries Service for almost 20 years and have experienced sexual harassment at sea on multiple occasions. I've also been involved in other instances where my female colleagues reported being sexually harassed and disrespected at sea.

In my experience, sexual harassment at sea happens in different ways. Young female scientists are targeted by offensive men and are made to feel very uncomfortable. These men target young women because they prey on the women's desire to perform well in the early parts of their career. This happened to me many times when I was in my twenties (about 20 years ago), to several of my coworkers in the same age range, and this continues to happen to my young female staff.

Now that I am a supervisor, I have a separate meeting with my young female staff to review the cruise staff list, so we can discuss who can be seen as an ally if harassment takes place and who to never be alone with. The reason we work together to identify allies is because not everyone will stand up and provide vocal support in these situations.

In this testimony, I would like to share my personal experience of at-sea harassment on a NOAA vessel, both as a survivor and as the supervisor of a survivor.

I participated on my first NOAA/NMFS cruise in 2003. My job as part of the science team was to assist in recording net-tow information while our nets were in the water collecting small invertebrates and fishes. Each time I was on deck, I was accompanied by a deck department crew member who was there to operate the ship's machinery (e.g. crane or winch) to which our nets were attached.

Unfortunately, this accompaniment required me to stand in a very small space with the deck staff person. There were many times during that first cruise when the two deck staff that had alternating schedules, would make grotesquely inappropriate comments to me about the types of sexual activities they liked engaging in with women my age. One of them in particular would lean on me and breathe down my neck.

To say that I was uncomfortable would be an understatement, but I didn't know what to do. This was my first cruise and I wanted to do well because I really liked the work. Unbeknownst to me, a crew person in the engineering department witnessed this behavior multiple times and submitted a formal harassment complaint. I was made aware of this complaint after the cruise when I received an email from the Executive Officer (XO) on the ship saying a sexual harassment complaint had been submitted, that the two accused deck staff had been informed that the complaint had been submitted regarding their behavior toward me, and that the XO and Commanding Officer (CO) were planning a visit to the NOAA science center where I worked to meet with me and retrieve my statement on the matter.

I was shocked by this email and scared that this would affect what my supervisor and coworkers thought of me. I was also afraid of the potential retaliation from these crew members because the XO's email clearly stated that the two accused staff were told they were being accused of harassing me, using my name and implying that I had been the one to submit the complaint. I informed my supervisor of the

situation and he encouraged me to write my statement and agreed to be present for the meeting with the XO and CO.

During that meeting I told the XO and CO that I reviewed the NOAA Sexual Harassment Policy and brought highlighted copies to the meeting to show them that they were not supposed to divulge my name to the accused. They mostly brushed over that point. When they asked if I wrote my statement, I slid it across the table. The CO used his folder to catch the document mid-slide, he then told me that if he took my statement then this matter was “out of his hands”, but if I took my statement back, then he could handle this matter “in-house.” I had no idea what that meant and needed guidance on how to make a choice. The CO said if he took my statement he would have to report it above him which would initiate a formal investigation, likely involving NOAA lawyers from headquarters. My supervisor then said that situation could get very ugly and complicated. I then asked what the CO meant by the “in-house” option. He said he would personally make sure the two accused staff would not engage in this bad behavior again.

I interpreted the CO’s explanation of what it would mean to formally submit my statement as the option that would severely tarnish my reputation and potentially jeopardize my career path. I then took my statement back because I was young, inexperienced, and afraid. I had graduated from college only six months prior to this situation, was a contract employee, and wanted to excel at my job and please my supervisor.

Right after that meeting, I went back to the lab where I worked to tell my coworkers about the meeting. None of them were surprised about the harassment I experienced with the two deck staff. They all confirmed that those two (and others) on the ship routinely targeted the new young women that joined the science party at sea. My coworkers told me I made the right decision to not submit my statement because during the likely formal investigation, the lawyers would probably turn it around to make it seem like I was inviting the sexual behavior by scrutinizing what I wore on the ship and for not telling these much older men to stop talking to me. I found all of this confusing, frustrating, and disappointing.

Over the subsequent years, I would sail on that same ship with those same two deck staff. In fact, I was back on that ship just a few months later. One of the two accused, came to me immediately to apologize for his behavior. I happily accepted his apology and never had an issue with him again. We continued to work together for the next 15 years until he retired.

My interactions with the other accused person did not go well. I suffered retaliation from him for many years. To my face, he pretended I was not there, and refused to talk to me even when we had to work together. However, I found out later that he was saying horrible things about me to other science staff, such as claiming that I was unprofessional, sexually inappropriate, and a liar. He also directly threatened my safety at a port in Mexico, by telling at-sea supervisor that I should be careful because he could make me disappear while the ship was docked at this foreign port. My at-sea supervisor’s response was to tell this person to stop saying things like that. I know this because he (my at-sea supervisor) reported this to me. He also warned me to steer clear of this person for the several days we were in port. Clearly this direct threat should have been handled differently, and I did not for one second feel safe while we were in that port.

This same deck person would go on to harass young women until he retired. I know because many years later I was on a cruise where one of my young female staff came to me in tears to say she was sexually harassed by this same person. I immediately called a safety meeting with the deck department chief, the XO, and CO and told them of the matter. The immediate result was that the offensive deck person could no longer work alone with female science staff, which meant he had to change his work schedule for the

remainder of the cruise. I wrote a formal statement to submit to my supervisor regarding the incident that would be included in the final cruise report, which is submitted to the CO and Office of Marine and Aviation Operations (OMAO), but I never received a response, and no action of which I am aware was taken.

In 2015, I participated on a NOAA cruise as a watch leader with my coworker as the chief scientist. We both witnessed the chief engineering electronics technician (EET; in charge of all electronic systems on the ship) being visibly drunk the first day we set sail. My coworker and I both told him that he should get some coffee and sober up. He laughed it off and said he was fine as he staggered away.

Shortly after that, this crew person started following me around which lasted for the next three days. He was drunk each time I saw him. There was one interaction I was able to avoid because my coworker/chief scientist saw the EET coming so I hid in a small room adjacent to the lab. When he saw that I wasn't in there, he left. The EET once followed me into my stateroom. I had my door open and only went in to retrieve a sweatshirt. He was saying many inappropriate things to me, very loudly. I told him that he needed to stop following me and should get sober so he could do his job properly.

I told one of the NOAA Corps Officers that the chief scientist and I had interacted with the chief EET who appeared to be drunk and we felt concerned that our safety would be jeopardized if he didn't sober up. I also told the officer that the chief EET was inappropriately following me around and professing love. The officer told me he was aware of the situation and would take care of it. The next time I saw the chief EET, several days later, he was sober and avoiding eye contact.

When I got back to land, I discussed the situation with my coworker who had been the chief scientist and told him that after thinking more about what we observed and experienced, I was not satisfied with how things were handled. I went to our supervisors and explained the situation. They were not sure how to proceed, so I said I would go to the deputy director of our science center.

During the meeting with the center deputy director, he asked the chief scientist if he had been aware that the chief EET was drunk and harassing me. I was extremely disappointed that the chief scientist, who had witnessed the harassment and discussed it with me, chose to deny that it had occurred. However, the safety issues were a concern, and the center deputy director said she would bring this up at her next OMAO meeting. That prompted a phone meeting with the ship's CO, my division deputy director, the center deputy director, and myself, where the CO denied that he had been aware of the situation. I find that impossible to believe, since the entire ship talked about the chief EET's drunken state for three days. There was little else discussed during that phone call, and I have not received any follow-up since.

Women on NOAA ships also experience disrespect to which our male colleagues are not subjected. A few years ago, I was a supervisor on a NOAA ship, and in charge of science operations for part of the day. During one of these occasions, one of the officers did not want to go to the location I requested and said instead that where we were headed was close enough. I told him it was not close enough and since the weather was permissible, I wanted to head to the new location. He then told me that my opinion didn't matter. The other officers heard him and said nothing. I told him that I was in charge of the science operations and needed him to change our bearing to get to the new location. He again told me my opinion didn't matter. I then told him that he should wake up the chief scientist and the CO to tell them his thoughts about my opinion. He didn't respond, and then changed the ship's bearing so we could get to the new location.

On a NOAA cruise just two months ago, my two female staff were in charge, one as the chief scientist and the other as the watch leader (in charge when the chief scientist is off watch). The two female

scientists noticed the ship's winch, which tows the scientific equipment, was not behaving properly. This is a severe safety issue, as a broken winch can maim or kill anyone standing on the ship's deck. These women both reported the potential winch malfunction to the officers on watch as well as the XO and CO during the safety meeting. Their warning was ignored, and the wire broke a few days later, resulting in lost equipment, but fortunately no injuries.

During the post cruise meeting, the female watch leader told the CO that the winch was a major problem and needed to be investigated and tested. His response to her was, "we can't make everything here warm and fuzzy for you." The CO then turned to our male colleague, and asked if he had anything to add. This male colleague was not on the cruise, had no leadership position, and was only present to help pack up our gear.

Conditions for women's safety on NOAA vessels have improved in the time that I've been with NOAA/NMFS, but much more needs to be done to make the at-sea workplace an environment that protects the mental and physical health of women. I ask that the Committee explore ways to improve the culture on NOAA vessels, particularly the interplay between the science crew and ship's crew. If complaints are not taken seriously and junior staff are intimidated and abused, NOAA's ability to carry out its critical missions in an ever-changing ocean will be severely compromised.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my experience and story.