

✘Yesterday, the National Ocean Council [released](#) the Obama Administration's much anticipated plan for implementing the National Ocean Policy. The newly released [National Ocean Policy Implementation Plan](#)

identifies practical, efficient, and responsible actions that Federal agencies will take to support healthy, productive, and resilient ocean, coastal, and Great Lakes waters, thriving coastal communities, and a robust, safe, and secure marine economy.

The Implementation Plan provides a blueprint for the dozens of federal agencies with responsibilities related to ocean, coastal, and Great Lakes resources, with the broad goals of increasing interagency cooperation, enhancing marine ecosystem health, and reducing ocean user conflicts. This document incorporates extensive [public comments](#) and stakeholder input on the [2012 Draft Implementation Plan](#).

Here's a brief summary and review of the thirty-page plan.

Wait, we have a National Ocean Policy?

But first, a quick rewind for readers who are not familiar with the history of the National Ocean Policy. President Obama established the [National Ocean Policy](#) via Executive Order 13,547 on July 19, 2010. In essence, the National Ocean Policy endeavors to manage conflicts between a growing number of ocean users (shippers, fishermen, military, renewable energy developers, etc.) while maintaining and enhancing the environmental health of ocean and coastal ecosystems.

The Executive Order created the 27-agency representative [National Ocean Council](#) to share information and streamline federal decisionmaking under the 140 federal laws affecting coastal, ocean, and Great Lakes resources. These laws and related programs have been enacted in piecemeal fashion over the course of many decades, resulting in a fragmented and inefficient ocean management regime. The Council is charged with developing cohesive action plans for [nine priority ocean objectives](#), which address regulatory priorities like ecosystem-based management, coastal and marine spatial planning, the Arctic, and climate change adaptation.

Environmental groups, federal agency representatives, many federal and state lawmakers, and other ocean users around the country applauded the National Ocean Policy. Some industry representatives and federal lawmakers, however—most notably, Rep. Doc Hastings

(R-WA), Chair of the House Natural Resources Committee—have made it their mission to destroy the Policy.

Wait, some people actually are opposed to this the Policy?

The National Ocean Policy has been surprisingly controversial for an initiative that is focused on streamlining decisionmaking and using *existing agency resources* more efficiently, and which explicitly *does not involve promulgation of new regulations*. Following enactment of the Policy, House lawmakers (with the support of oil and gas producers, commercial fisherman, shippers, and other industry representatives) held various hearings questioning the intended purpose and consequences of the Policy (see, e.g., an October 2011 House hearing on “[A Plan for Further Restrictions on Ocean, Coastal and Inland Activities](#)”) and even made multiple [attempts](#) to block funding for implementation based on a vague claim that the National Ocean Policy will result in “ocean zoning.” Hopefully, the common-sense approach of the Implementation Plan will help to put these ungrounded fears to bed.

The Implementation Plan

The [Implementation Plan](#) emphasizes ways the federal government can support local and regional decisionmaking, improve data collection and accessibility, and more efficiently leverage existing federal investments. A reoccurring theme throughout the plan is the need to collect more fundamental data about the ocean through better technologies. It is encouraging to see a focus on fundamental science in the Plan because our present lack of understanding of basic ocean processes often presents challenges to federal restoration and conservation efforts, such as quantifying the impacts of and identifying appropriate restoration responses to the BP *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill.

Notably, burgeoning activity and changing conditions in the Arctic provide a backdrop for several Arctic-focused action items, reflecting the fact that Changing Arctic Conditions is one of National Ocean Policy’s nine priority objectives and signifying that Arctic resources will continue to be a major focus of federal agencies. Another Plan theme is moving from ecosystem-based management theory to practice. Response to environmental threats—in particular, invasive species and climate change—also feature prominently in the Plan.

The Implementation Plan is broken down into five thematic chapters. I’ve provided a brief review of each part below.

I. The Ocean Economy: The first section of the Plan focuses on the economic benefits of

the ocean and reducing government inefficiencies that may be hindering ocean industry growth.

Science, Data: Some of the federal actions identified here relate to scientific data, including calls for federal agencies to improve mapping, charting, and observation data, and enhance commercial access to data. Additionally, the Plan states that agencies will harness improved science and monitoring to prevent hypoxia, harmful algal blooms, invasive species, and other environmental degradation associated with lost employment opportunities.

Jobs: There are some broadly worded action items related to employment and a skilled workforce. For instance, the Plan states that agencies will protect and create wetland and other restoration jobs through existing restoration initiatives, and will leverage existing federal investments in ocean education to ensure a diverse and skilled workforce.

Permit Streamlining: The most notable action item in this section states that agencies will coordinate agency permit actions through pilot “permit streamlining” projects, “while ensuring appropriate environmental and other required safeguards.” On one hand, anytime the government proposes “permit streamlining,” environmentalists everywhere raise their eyebrows, as streamlining has too often resulted in less oversight and lax review of development proposals. On the other hand, in the case of renewable ocean energy development, for example, streamlined permitting procedures could result in favorable environmental outcomes. I hope the “streamlining” undertaken pursuant to this Plan will translate into optimized use of the NEPA environmental impact review process, which, in turn, leads to increased transparency and improved mitigation of cumulative ocean impacts. The fact that agencies will start streamlining slowly through pilot projects should help allay some fears about a complete erosion of environmental safeguards—so long as the selected pilot projects are not offshore oil and gas development. We will await additional details on the pilot projects.

II. Safety and Security: The Plan’s second section keys in on the security of the ocean domain, U.S. marine boundaries, and international cooperation under the Convention on the Law of the Sea (which the United States has not yet joined—although the State Department [declares accession is a top national priority](#)). Federal actions identified within this category are fairly unremarkable, as one might expect given the fact that security is a traditional federal responsibility.

Data, Resources: The Plan states that agencies will leverage existing resources to

assess threats and secure ports. Related to the theme of data collection, agencies also will enhance information about the marine domain through use of optimized remote sensing systems and exchange of information with international entities (e.g., the International Maritime Organization, other nations, etc.).

Arctic: There are several action items related to changing Arctic conditions, all focused on disaster prevention. The Plan states agencies intend to strengthen communication systems and mapping in the Arctic to improve safety. Additionally, the Plan states that agencies will prepare for increased Arctic vessel traffic with interagency spill prevention and response activities. This is encouraging to see given increased oil and gas activity in the Arctic region, and recognizing that we presently are unprepared for a *Deepwater Horizon*-scale oil spill in the icy Arctic environment.

III. Coastal and Ocean Resilience: This section calls upon the federal government to work cooperatively with states, localities, and tribes to prevent and mitigate ocean and coastal habitat degradation.

Science, Data: Once again, we see attention to data collection and research. Identified federal actions include: conducting pilot studies to address wetland loss to complement ongoing initiatives like the Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Council; preventing invasive species populations by focusing on early detection and response; more effectively using voluntary programs to improve water quality; developing an integrated research agenda to address gaps in our understanding of cumulative impacts; and establishing a Health Early Warning System to alert public health officials and managers of marine-related human and environmental health threats.

Climate Adaptation: The Plan reports that agencies will incorporate climate adaptation strategies into future planning, management, and infrastructure investments. This is not groundbreaking news since agencies already are required to prepare for climate change under another [Executive Order, No. 13,514](#). Nonetheless, as I've [argued here before](#), sea-level rise adaptation planning is urgent, and any additional attention and resources devoted to adaptation is positive news. In addition, it is always nice to see reinforcement of the common-sense principles that the federal government should not make investments that are contrary to adaptation objectives and should incorporate sea-level rise into coastal planning.

Sanctuaries: The Plan states that agencies will support reactivation of the National Marine Sanctuary Site Evaluation List (SEL), a public process tool for evaluating potential marine sanctuary areas. The Plan's commitment to reactivating the SEL is

welcome news. The stakeholder-driven SEL process allows communities to recommend new national marine sanctuaries for consideration. Currently, there are 14 marine protected areas covering approximately 150,000 square miles of waters. The [Sanctuaries Program](#) is a valuable tool for habitat and biodiversity conservation—and it may become an increasingly valuable tool as ocean acidification and climate change put additional stress on marine environments and drive more species toward extinction.

IV. Local Choices: This section focuses on ways the federal government can better support local efforts to protect marine resources.

Data: One set of action items focuses again on data. Agencies will enhance access to federal data through a central portal: ocean.data.gov. Additionally, agencies will support tribal involvement in planning, and work to integrate traditional knowledge and data collected by tribes into federal data systems.

Management, Climate: The Plan outlines how agencies will conduct pilot projects to test ecosystem-based management processes and decision tools. Agencies also will develop best practices and guidance for coastal communities to assess their vulnerability to sea-level rise. Again, three cheers for additional resources for local coastal managers!

Marine Planning: Now, we come to what previously had been the most controversial aspect of the National Ocean Policy: marine planning. The Plan states that agencies will support the efforts of states, tribes, and Fishery Management Councils that chose to participate in a regional planning body, and provide additional guidance to regional planning bodies that elect to move forward. The Plan reiterates that “[r]egional planning bodies are not regulatory bodies and have no independent legal authority to regulate or otherwise direct Federal, State, tribal, or local government actions. All activities will continue to be regulated under existing authorities.”

Furthermore, the Plan confirms that “[s]hould all States within a region choose not to participate in a regional planning body within their region, a regional planning body will not be established.” In that instance, federal agencies instead will consult with states, fishery management councils, and other stakeholders to ensure coordination between national and local objectives. This does not sound anything like a scary “ocean zoning” proposal. Presumably, however, opponents of sensible ocean management will still attempt to construe these action items as a big, bad, burdensome federal ocean takeover. Let’s hope opponents once and for all are drowned out by National Ocean Policy supporters who recognize the value of the Implementation Plan.

V. Science and Information: The final section of the Plan digs deeper into ways science and technology can improve our decisionmaking about the ocean.

Science, Data: Unsurprisingly, science and data are key themes in this chapter. Federal action items include: advance fundamental knowledge and observation technologies like remote sensing systems; coordinating a nationally integrated information management system for observation data; and implementing a “distributed biological observatory” (i.e., an array of monitoring sites) to monitor changes in the Arctic.

Ocean literacy: The Plan states agencies will capitalize on opportunities to include ocean and coastal topics in K-12 and informal education programs such as National Parks and science centers.

Management: Ecosystem management again plays a key role. The Plan states that agencies will develop and share decision-support tools to improve ecosystem-based management and intergovernmental coordination.

Overall, the Implementation Plan is a common-sense, science-based blueprint for improved federal ocean management. Building upon the National Ocean Policy and the preceding [recommendations](#) of the Interagency Ocean Policy Task Force, the Plan emphasizes the importance of cooperation and collaboration among federal agencies and with local planning bodies, and recognizes the need for additional data and research about marine environments. The oceans are in critical need of improved management. Anyone who cares about ocean health and the ocean economy—or even just federal government efficiency—should support this Plan.