



A sea lion welcomes the news from the White House. NOAA photo.

Cross-posted at [CPRBlog](#).

Last year, [I noted](#) that the interim report of the Interagency Ocean Task Force appointed by President Obama marked a promising step toward a national ocean policy. Now the Task Force has issued its [final recommendations](#), which the President promptly began implementing.

A national ocean policy has been a long time coming. Back in 2003, the [Pew Oceans Commission called for](#) a new “unified national ocean policy based on protecting ecosystem health.” A year later, the [U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy echoed](#) many of the Pew Commission’s recommendations. But the Bush administration sat on those recommendations. President Bush did [create an executive-branch Committee on Ocean Policy](#), but failed to give it any substantive mandate.

President Obama has filled that gap. On Monday, he issued an [Executive Order](#) (as yet unnumbered) replacing the Committee on Ocean Policy with a [National Ocean Council](#) jointly chaired by the Council on Environmental Quality and the Office of Science and Technology Policy. That’s important because it means that the Council will have a strong voice in the White House.

Following the Task Force’s recommendations, President Obama’s executive order sets out a national ocean policy which puts environmental protection first, rests on a strong scientific foundation, and gently prods the U.S. toward endorsing the Law of the Sea. Here’s the full policy statement:

Sec. 2. Policy. (a) To achieve an America whose stewardship ensures that the ocean, our coasts, and the Great Lakes are healthy and resilient, safe and productive, and understood and treasured so as to promote the well-being, prosperity, and security of present and future generations, it is the policy of the United States to:

(i) protect, maintain, and restore the health and biological diversity of ocean, coastal, and Great Lakes ecosystems and resources;

- (ii) improve the resiliency of ocean, coastal, and Great Lakes ecosystems, communities, and economies;
- (iii) bolster the conservation and sustainable uses of land in ways that will improve the health of ocean, coastal, and Great Lakes ecosystems;
- (iv) use the best available science and knowledge to inform decisions affecting the ocean, our coasts, and the Great Lakes, and enhance humanity's capacity to understand, respond, and adapt to a changing global environment;
- (v) support sustainable, safe, secure, and productive access to, and uses of the ocean, our coasts, and the Great Lakes;
- (vi) respect and preserve our Nation's maritime heritage, including our social, cultural, recreational, and historical values;
- (vii) exercise rights and jurisdiction and perform duties in accordance with applicable international law, including respect for and preservation of navigational rights and freedoms, which are essential for the global economy and international peace and security;
- (viii) increase scientific understanding of ocean, coastal, and Great Lakes ecosystems as part of the global interconnected systems of air, land, ice, and water, including their relationships to humans and their activities;
- (ix) improve our understanding and awareness of changing environmental conditions, trends, and their causes, and of human activities taking place in ocean, coastal, and Great Lakes waters; and
- (x) foster a public understanding of the value of the ocean, our coasts, and the Great Lakes to build a foundation for improved stewardship.

Every federal agency is directed to implement the national ocean policy "to the fullest extent consistent with applicable law," and to cooperate in a Council-directed process for coastal and marine spatial planning. Planning is a key element of the new policy, intended to identify and reduce conflicts between incompatible uses, provide a transparent and unified locus for allocating ocean resources, and address the problem of unrecognized cumulative impacts.

It would be better if Congress would enact this ocean policy together with a mandate for marine spatial planning into statutory law (say, [in an organic act for NOAA](#)). In the absence of congressional action, though, this executive order is about as robust an approach as possible. Let's hope it means that the White House is squarely behind a vigorous ocean policy, and that the National Ocean Council will set to its new work with enthusiasm.