

National Ocean Policy Reform

Much of the decline in ocean and coastal ecosystem health is due to failures in our governance approaches and structures, including fragmented laws, confusing and overlapping jurisdictions, and lack of a clear national ocean policy. Currently, eleven cabinet-level departments and four independent agencies have responsibilities for ocean and coastal policy and management. The nation must adopt a comprehensive and coordinated national ocean policy that will better enable us to protect and restore ocean and coastal ecosystems so that they will continue to be healthy, resilient, and able to provide the goods and services that people want and need.

Guiding Principles for Comprehensive Ocean Management

Comprehensive ocean management means taking care of the seas and coasts as a whole, rather than looking at each resource and management issue. Every piece of our ocean policy should fit together to create a larger picture of ocean health. A national ocean policy would serve to unify and guide the decision making and actions of a multitude of federal agencies with ocean management responsibilities and to bring greater coherency to the numerous federal ocean and coastal laws by establishing a common goal. We need to move toward a management approach that considers human activities, their benefits, and their potential impacts within the broader context of interconnected social, economic, and ecological factors.

The Joint Ocean Commission Initiative believes the concepts listed below must guide and be incorporated into meaningful and effective legislation to address national ocean governance reform:

- ***A National Ocean Policy.*** A national ocean policy is needed to acknowledge the importance of oceans to the nation's economic and ecological health and to protect, maintain, and restore marine ecosystems so that they remain healthy and resilient and able to deliver the services humans want and need. A national ocean policy would serve to unify and guide the decision making and actions of a multitude of federal agencies with ocean management responsibilities and to bring greater coherency to the numerous federal ocean and coastal laws by establishing a common goal.
- ***Management Decisions Grounded in an Ecosystem-based Approach.*** In carrying out a national ocean policy, we need to implement an ecosystem-based management approach that examines the links among living and nonliving resources. Instead of managing one issue or resource in isolation, we need to move toward a management approach that considers human activities, their benefits, and their potential impacts within the broader context of interconnected social, economic, and ecological factors.
- ***A Stronger NOAA Capable of Implementing an Ecosystem-based Management Approach.*** National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration should be codified through passage of an organic act for the agency, and that would establish NOAA as the lead ocean agency and articulate a core mission of: assessment, prediction, and operations; ecosystem-based

management; and science, research, and education. An organic act should also call for reorganization of the agency to better equip it to carry out its core mission and to remain science-based, but with its management programs better connected to make use of that science in decision making.

- ***Federal Agency Coordination and Leadership.*** Eleven cabinet-level departments and four independent agencies have responsibilities for ocean and coastal policy and management. High-level attention to carry out a national ocean policy and improved coordination and communication among ocean agencies would greatly enhance the effectiveness of our management of ocean and coastal resources.

Ecosystem-Based Management and Other Reforms

In order to achieve the goal of comprehensive ocean management, the Joint Initiative encourages Congress to take steps to establish a national ocean policy, enable implementation of an ecosystem-based management approach, codify NOAA, and promote more effective coordination and integration of federal ocean and coastal programs at national and regional levels.

Ecosystem-based management is a system for managing human activities that recognizes and is responsive to the needs of the natural ecosystem and that considers the links between different living and nonliving components of the land, sea, and atmosphere, and the health of human communities.

Comprehensive Offshore Management

Many of our ocean and coastal resources are managed on a case-by-case basis, where the permitting process for various resources is assessed and managed in isolation from others. The growing number of proposed activities and pressures facing ocean areas and resources—including proposals for wind and wave energy, liquefied natural gas, gas terminals, desalinization plants, oil exploration, aquaculture, recreation, shipping, and fishing—has resulted in more concern on how to effectively manage these multiple and competing uses. Several different uses for offshore areas have been proposed or are underway; however, these uses may compete with one another or be incompatible. Imagine if, on land, there were no rules on whether you could build a plant that produces hazardous waste next to an area that someone else wants to use for a housing development, school or public park. The group that wants to build the plant goes to the agency regulating plants that produce hazardous waste to get a permit, while the group that wants to build a housing development goes to the agency regulating housing developments, with little coordination between the two. Similarly along the shores, there can be inappropriate uses in a given place or incompatible uses sited right next to each other. Thus, the Joint Initiative encourages movement toward a comprehensive and coordinated approach that recognizes the interactions and interdependence of multiple resources and their uses.

See Also:

Regional and State Ocean Leadership

Oceans and Climate Change

Ocean Science, Research, and Education

New Funding for Ocean Policy and Programs

Law of the Sea Convention

For Further Information:

From Sea to Shining Sea: Priorities for Ocean Policy Reform

An Agenda for Action: Moving Regional Ocean Governance from Theory to Practice

Summary of Key Ocean Bills