

Saving Our Oceans

Federal commission recommends state involvement in protecting coastal waters

By Amanda Mays



IN THEIR FURY, oceans can topple homes, flood streets and erode beachfronts. Despite all their physical power, however, oceans are a fragile resource that is in danger, according to the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy.

The commission, which began work in 2001, issued its final report September 20, making it clear that we need to act soon to save our oceans.

In testimony September 21 before the U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation, retired U.S. Navy Admiral James D. Watkins, who was commission chairman, said: "While the final report contains over 200 recommendations, the overriding message is this: we need to act now to reverse distressing declines if this and future generations are to continue enjoying the many benefits we derive from our oceans and coasts."

Those problems, according to the commission's report, *An Ocean Blueprint for the 21st Century*, are not just worrisome for states in coastal areas. They have a major impact on the nation's economy as a whole.

While coastal counties comprise only 17 percent of the land area in the contiguous United States, they are home to more than

53 percent of the nation's total population. Based on estimates in 2000, ocean-related activities such as fishing and tourism directly contributed more than \$117 billion to American prosperity and supported well over 2 million jobs. If other coastal activities are added, the figure grows to \$1 trillion, or one-tenth of the nation's annual gross domestic product. And when the economies throughout coastal watershed counties are considered, the economic contribution swells to more than \$4.5 trillion, fully half of the nation's gross domestic product, accounting for roughly 60 million jobs.

However, that economic activity has come at a cost to our oceans and Great Lakes, according to the report, which concludes that our water quality has been degraded, our fisheries depleted, our recreational areas despoiled, our wetlands drained, our health and security endangered, and the economic vitality of our oceans and coasts compromised.

Even if you don't live near the coast, the economic importance hits just as close to home. Annually, the nation's ports handle more than \$700 billion in merchandise, while the cruise industry and its passengers account for another \$12 billion in spending.



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Americans not only derive economic benefits from the coasts, they also draw pleasure.

An estimated 180 million people head to the beach every summer, bringing new jobs, businesses and recreation to coastal states. The result is that tourism and recreation—including resorts, restaurants, vacation housing, fishing and marinas have created one of the nation’s largest and fastest-growing economic forces.

The oceans bring enjoyment for some, a way of life for others. Regardless, it is clear that our nation’s oceans are critical resources that must be protected, the commission warns.

Why Act Now?

The commission was mandated by the Oceans Act of 2000 (Public Law 106–256), authorized by Congress and appointed by the president. The 16-member panel was created to establish findings and make recommendations to the presi-

dent and Congress for a coordinated and comprehensive national ocean policy.

In their report the commissioners found that in 2001, 23 percent of the nation’s estuarine areas were considered impaired for swimming, fishing, or supporting marine species. In 2003, about 18,000 days of beach closings and advisories were issued across the nation, most due to the presence of bacteria associated with fecal contamination. The panel recommends moving toward an ecosystem-based management approach so that the coasts are more entwined with land use issues. In doing so, the commission made 212 recommendations including a new governance structure, better science and research, and a new educational program to instill stronger stewardship for future generations.

What Next?

Currently, there is no multi-issue interagency mechanism to guide, oversee, and coordinate all aspects of ocean and coastal policy. State and federal agencies as well as numerous other

organizations including tribes and nonprofits all continue to monitor our nation’s oceans. The commission’s preliminary report, issued in April, concluded that there was confusion, duplication and fragmentation regarding how the oceans were to be managed and protected. Thus, the commission recommends in its final report a new governance framework that calls for Congress to establish a National Ocean Council (NOC) within the executive office of the president, chaired by an assistant to the president and composed of cabinet secretaries of departments and administrators of the independent agencies with relevant ocean- and coastal-related responsibilities.

In this role, the commission recommends that the NOC should be the primary coordinator for national policies. The assistant to the president would advise the Office of Management and Budget and the agencies on appropriate funding levels for important ocean- and coastal-related activities, and prepare a biennial report as mandated by Section 5 of the Oceans Act of 2000. A Committee on Ocean Science, Education, Technology, and Operations and a Committee on Ocean Resource Management would be created under the NOC to support its coordination and planning functions.

To ensure state involvement, the commission recommends the creation of a President’s Council of Advisors on Ocean Policy, comprised of nonfederal representatives from state, territorial, tribal, and local governments. It would also include academic, public interest and private sector organizations. This structure, according to the commission, would provide a formal framework for nonfederal input to the NOC and the president on ocean and coastal policy matters.

States Respond

The commission received comments on the preliminary report from 37 governors. In general, states agreed that there is a need for better coordination for governing our nation’s oceans; however, how to implement this goal is debatable. California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger said, “It is difficult to assess at this early stage whether the on-the-ground application of the nearly 200 recommendations will avoid the historical tendency to create more government, unnecessary provisions, or duplication.”

Gov. Bob Riley agreed that while Alabama supports the creation of a NOC it should be clear that this new council “is not a new layer of bureaucracy but will, in fact, be used to streamline existing federal programs, reduce duplication, improve efficiency and enhance cooperation among existing federal ocean programs.”

What states do not want are federal mandates that are unfunded in a time of already tight state budgets. However, states do want involvement. After all, as Alaska's Department of Environmental Quality Commissioner Ernesta Ballard said at the recent CSG State Leadership and Trends Forum and CSG-WEST annual meeting, "State agencies have the local knowledge and experience to operate in their waters." No state wants to relinquish responsibility for its coast, especially when it has been successful in meeting coastal water quality conditions.

California is the first state to begin following the commission's recommendations. On October 18, Schwarzenegger unveiled a plan to protect the state's coastal waters and said he wanted California's plan, called "Protecting Our Ocean: California's Action Strategy," to go beyond federal recommendations.

"In my administration we reject the notion that we have to choose between protecting the environment and protecting jobs," Schwarzenegger said. "We will do both."

The Next Step

The president is required, under the Oceans Act of 2000, to respond to the commission's report by December 21, but it does not end there. The commission has recommended actions for state involvement at a variety of levels. For instance, it recommends creating regional ocean councils to help coordinate ocean management on a holistic ecosystem-based approach, which is a natural fit for state involvement and participation. Formal and informal education regarding ocean management is another area for state contribution. (See sidebar for other state opportunities.)

The report may be final, but the future of our nation's oceans is not.

For more information including all 37 governors' responses and the full final report, please visit www.oceancommission.gov.

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State Involvement in Shaping Ocean Policy

The U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy has recommended actions to achieve a coordinated and comprehensive national ocean policy at all levels of government—including federal, state, and local—and has called for enhanced partnerships among federal agencies and state and local stakeholders.

The commission sees a central role for states in ocean and coastal management and identifies many opportunities for them to contribute to an integrated national ocean policy. The President's Council of Advisors on Ocean Policy, a high-level advisory body to be appointed by the president, should serve as one important formal structure for input from nonfederal individuals and organizations, including governors of coastal states, along with other state, territorial, tribal, and local government representatives.

Some of the important areas for state involvement, as discussed throughout the report, include:

- Formal and informal ocean education at all levels, including outreach to underrepresented and underserved communities.
- Creation of regional ocean councils to help coordinate federal, state, tribal, and local planning and action, and designation of regional ocean information programs to supply the information needed to support an ecosystem-based approach.
- Improved management of coastal areas, including incorporation of coastal watersheds, to achieve better control of nonpoint sources of pollution, growth management, natural hazards mitigation, marine transportation planning, regional sediment management and identification of priority habitats for conservation and restoration.
- Development of a prioritized, comprehensive plan for upgrading the nation's aging and inadequate wastewater and drinking water infrastructure, including improved storm water management.

- Coordination of a national monitoring network and creation of useful products based on monitoring data.
- Planning for early detection, prompt notification, and rapid response to marine invasive species.
- Prevention of marine debris, in part through public outreach and education.
- Management of commercial and recreational fish stocks and sustainable aquaculture operations.
- Protection of corals and coral reefs.
- Participation in a broad dialogue on the development of a coordinated offshore management regime, including the design and implementation of marine protected areas.
- Participation in the management of renewable and nonrenewable ocean energy sources, including attention to their environmental and socioeconomic impacts.

Another area where state input will be essential is the development of ocean observations and science to support policy decisions. States will need to communicate their information needs and priorities as part of the creation of a national strategy for basic and applied ocean science and technology, including the social science and economic research needed to understand the human dimensions and economic value of the oceans and coasts. States should also participate as full partners in the design and implementation of regional observing systems and their integration into the national Integrated Ocean Observing System. Many of the commission's recommendations call for the executive branch to consult with the President's Council of Advisors on Ocean Policy and for federal entities to work closely with state and local governments.