

FACT SHEET

# THE FIRST REGIONAL OCEAN PLANS: A ONE-YEAR REVIEW

The U.S. Atlantic Ocean economy is busier than ever before: A chain of offshore wind leases is under development, interest in marine shellfish and finfish farming is growing, and the Panama Canal expansion, opened in 2016, has increased East Coast trade and traffic from massive ships.<sup>1</sup> The ocean is also home to a wide variety of wildlife, from critically endangered North Atlantic right whales and sea turtles to dolphins and a rich array of fish. It is imperative that we coordinate existing and new ocean uses to drive responsible growth that supports our wildlife—as well as our families and businesses—for generations to come.

Dozens of state and federal agencies with overlapping and sometimes conflicting responsibilities make decisions about offshore business development. These agencies don't always collaborate up front with each other or with stakeholders, and that can create confusion and controversy. But this is changing.

In December 2016, planning bodies for the Mid-Atlantic and Northeast regions, made up of state and federal agency representatives, fisheries managers, and American Indian tribes, committed to enhancing ocean coordination by signing on to regional plans that help ensure the waters off our shores remain healthy and serve as economic engines for the long haul. Members of the public and ocean stakeholders were asked to weigh in at every stage of these plans' development and as a result the plans are grounded in what the states and communities want to see. These first-



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ever regional ocean plans—the *Northeast Ocean Plan* and the *Mid-Atlantic Regional Ocean Action Plan*—set out best practices for state and federal agency collaboration on key issues, such as sand mining to rebuild our beaches and ways to enhance ocean recreation.<sup>2</sup> By using the best available data and calling for early stakeholder engagement, these plans for good governance will allow managers and industry leaders to make better-informed and quicker development decisions.

***“The whole point . . . is for every entity at the table to work together to maintain a healthy ocean ecosystem, sustainable ocean uses, because we found that . . . the work being done in a vacuum just isn’t going to get it done for these pressing challenges of the 21st century.”***

–John T. Kennedy, Former Mid-Atlantic Gateway Director, U.S. Maritime Administration<sup>3</sup>

The regional ocean plans are only a year old, but we are already seeing benefits.

### **OCEAN PLANS ARE HELPING ADVANCE SMART SITING OF AQUACULTURE, SAND MINING, AND OTHER OCEAN USES**

To support the plans’ development, each regional planning body collected a massive amount of state, federal, and stakeholder data on ocean use and marine life and offered access to this information on easy-to-use websites, the Northeast Ocean Data Portal and the Mid-Atlantic Ocean Data Portal.<sup>4</sup> Open to all, the websites are a starting point for project discussions and have become go-to resources that promote better understanding of the offshore environment. The portals are helping policymakers shape sensible proposals and making agency decisions more transparent. For example:

- New Jersey recreational fishermen recently used portal data to share with federal regulators their concerns about a potential sand mining project at Manasquan Ridge, a key fishing ground for summer flounder and bluefish.<sup>5</sup> Parties are now discussing alternatives.
- Even before the ocean plans were final, the Northeastern Massachusetts Aquaculture Center at Salem State University used portal data to inform development of the first shellfish farm in federal Atlantic waters, which was permitted in 2015. The application used portal data to show that the 33-acre farm employing longlines to grow blue mussels would not negatively impact whales, shipping traffic, or existing fishing activity.<sup>6</sup>



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### **OCEAN PLANS ARE HELPING BRING STAKEHOLDERS TO THE TABLE EARLY, FOR EXAMPLE TO DISCUSS OFFSHORE WIND**

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The offshore wind industry is ripe for tremendous growth within an already crowded ocean economy. In December 2016, the United States’ first offshore wind project began

commercial operations in Rhode Island waters. With offshore wind leases issued for areas off the coasts of Massachusetts, New York, New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina, the rest of the Eastern Seaboard is poised to advance.

Encouraged by the regional ocean planning effort, the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM), the agency in charge of offshore wind siting, has taken steps to increase public involvement, publishing *A Citizen’s Guide* to the bureau’s renewable energy authorization process.<sup>7</sup> In response to concerns about the potential impact of offshore wind development on existing fisheries, BOEM contracted with the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine to launch the Atlantic Offshore Renewable Energy Development and Fisheries Steering Committee to hear from fisheries scientists, fishery managers, and fishermen directly about how best to identify, monitor, and mitigate the impact of offshore wind energy activities on fishing communities and fish populations.<sup>8</sup>

### **OUR OCEAN ECONOMY**

The Atlantic Ocean has long anchored economic activity in the Mid-Atlantic and Northeast states. Coastal communities—from Maine’s bustling fishing harbors to New Jersey’s lively beaches—rely on the Atlantic Ocean for important jobs. In 2014, the U.S. Atlantic Ocean economy contributed roughly \$92 billion to the country’s gross domestic product.<sup>9</sup> More than 60 percent of that came from tourism, recreation, and the fishing and seafood industries. These businesses largely depend on a clean ocean, clean beaches, and abundant fish and wildlife. Together they employ more than 1 million people, supporting 80 percent of all Atlantic Ocean-based jobs.<sup>10</sup>



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### OCEAN PLANS ARE HELPING IDENTIFY AREAS IMPORTANT FOR OCEAN WILDLIFE AND MONITOR OCEAN HEALTH

Healthy oceans are a crucial source of food, jobs, and recreation—the linchpin of a prosperous “blue economy” and a key component of the quality of life for millions of people who live near or visit the Atlantic shoreline. In the Mid-Atlantic and Northeast, state and federal leaders are working closely with scientists to identify offshore areas that contribute significantly to overall ecosystem health by hosting a high diversity and/or abundance of wildlife as well as those that are unique or especially sensitive. This information provides government, business, and environmental planners a guide to places that warrant particularly careful consideration in siting decisions and that may be of major importance for wildlife in the face of climate change–induced stresses. These include warming waters, which are shifting fish stocks northward, and ocean acidification, which makes it harder for shellfish to grow their protective coverings and survive.<sup>11</sup> Additionally,

- Both regions are developing a suite of ocean health indicators, like water quality, that help convey where ocean health is improving and where additional attention may be needed.

- The Mid-Atlantic Coastal Acidification Network (MACAN) has formed to serve as an information hub for researchers, industry, and resource managers and to support collaboration to address coastal and ocean acidification.<sup>12</sup>

### OCEAN PLANS ARE HELPING IDENTIFY OCEAN RECREATION HOT SPOTS

State officials in the Mid-Atlantic just finished a series of workshops to discuss with community members how and where they like to use the ocean for recreation such as surfing, kayaking, paddleboarding, and boating.<sup>13</sup> Knowing more about how people are enjoying the ocean allows for better project siting and improves understanding of where conflicts among users could occur.

**There is a lot happening offshore, and the regional plans are helping inform our decisions about this shared public space. With one year down, great strides are being made to support sustainable economic development, help understand and conserve ocean health, and balance multiple ocean interests.** Millions of people have a stake in the Atlantic Ocean and its future, and these plans will continue to ensure that all have a voice in decision making, right from the start.

*“The regional ocean plans give recreational users an opportunity to be taken seriously in ocean planning. We now have a venue to let federal, state, and tribal representatives know what areas are important to us, our concerns about proposed changes, and the ways in which these changes affect our enjoyment of the coasts.”*

–Matt Gove, Mid-Atlantic Policy Manager, Surfrider Foundation<sup>14</sup>

## ENDNOTES

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- 2 *Northeast Ocean Plan*, Northeast Regional Planning Body, October 2016, <http://neoplananning.org/plan/>. *Mid-Atlantic Regional Ocean Action Plan*, Mid-Atlantic Regional Planning Body, November 2016, <https://www.boem.gov/Ocean-Action-Plan/>.
- 3 Excerpted from *Ocean Frontiers III: Leaders in Ocean Stewardship & the New Blue Economy*. For more information and short video clips, see “Ocean Frontiers: A New Era in Ocean Stewardship,” <http://ocean-frontiers.org/the-films/ocean-frontiers-3/>. For stories in support of regional planning, see “Keep the Ocean Working,” <http://keeptheoceanworking.com/>.
- 4 Mid-Atlantic Ocean Data Portal, <http://portal.midatlanticocean.org/>. Northeast Ocean Data Portal, <http://www.northeastoceandata.org>.
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- 12 Mid-Atlantic Coastal Acidification Network, home page, <http://midacan.org/>.
- 13 Mid-Atlantic Regional Council on the Ocean, “Workshop Series Explores the Value of Non-consumptive Recreational Areas,” October 19, 2017, <http://midatlanticocean.org/workshop-series-explores-the-value-of-non-consumptive-recreational-areas/>.
- 14 Gove, Matt, interview by Alison Chase, January 18, 2018.