



ATLANTIC OFFSHORE LOBSTERMEN'S ASSOCIATION

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Betsy Nicholson, NE RPB Federal Co-lead
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
National Marine Fisheries Service, Northeast Regional Office
55 Great Republic Drive
Gloucester, MA 01930-2276

Dear Ms. Nicholson,

I write as representative of the Atlantic Offshore Lobstermen's Association (AOLA) to provide comments on the draft Northeast ocean plan. AOLA is a regional trade association comprised of federal waters lobster and Jonah crab fishermen from Maine to New Jersey, as well as a wide array of fisheries related businesses. Our Association applauds the work of the Northeast Regional Planning Body (RPB) in developing the draft regional ocean plan and compiling an extensive regional data portal.

As a guiding document of best practices for interagency coordination, we think the draft ocean plan has much promise, however we worry about the proverbial *devil in the details*. It will take a concerted and continued effort by all partner agencies to ensure that the ocean plan serves as a "better mechanism"¹ to apply existing laws and regulations, rather than become an additional layer of bureaucracy. There also needs to be effort made to interface the Northeast plan with the Mid-Atlantic plan, relevant to agencies, resources, and activities that overlap the regions.

While we understand that the Executive Order which directs this action does not create new legislation or authority, it does require federal agencies consult the plan and reference the data portal "to the extent practicable" while operating under existing authorities. In our view, this creates legal and budgetary ambiguities that could undermine future actions of the participating agencies.

In particular, we have concerns about the draft plan's statement that "continuing work to develop the IEA [Important Ecological Area] Framework and explore options for its use within federal law is a priority."² In theory we support ecosystem based management approaches, however we worry that this specific approach could supersede or conflict with fisheries managers' current habitat management and ecosystem authority. Without seeing the specifics, it is impossible to provide substantive comments on this issue at this time, therefore we implore the Planning Body to gather additional public comments once a draft IEA Framework is complete.

¹ Page 150. Draft Northeast Ocean Plan.

² Page 173. Draft Northeast Ocean Plan.

Development of the regional ocean data portal was a monumental achievement. This data portal holds an unprecedentedly broad array of ocean data, which should improve the consideration of marine resources and fisheries by other ocean stakeholders. However, in its current form, the portal's fisheries data is not comprehensive. It is extremely important to the lobster industry that the Planning Body make adding lobster fishery information a priority and develop a timeline to complete the task. Any update of that component should be done in close coordination with the New England Fishery Management Council and Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission.

Given the requirement that federal agencies consult the data portal to inform review processes, it is critical that the portal be maintained and kept current. The plan outlines such efforts during the next 1-2 years, but leaves many questions regarding the out years. Even where the plan details a partner agency's commitment to future portal maintenance, there is the outstanding question of budget. We are concerned that without a Congressional budget directive, federal agencies will be hamstrung to fulfill these commitments under future Presidential Administrations.

We are encouraged to see in the plan an expansive and ambitious detailing of regional research priorities and a vision for the role of the Regional Planning Body (RPB) in research endeavors. We find the intent described below to be laudable, but feel a better defined protocol is needed to achieve any real impact coordinating regional research efforts.

“... the RPB will have a convening and coordinating role for achieving the science and research priorities identified in this Plan. This approach recognizes that there are many existing federal and state agency initiatives, academic and research institutions, regional science consortia, and other nongovernmental organizations already advancing progress through existing science and research plans; the RPB can help make connections between these existing efforts.”³

Finally, we congratulate the entire RPB team and the many contributors and advisors to the first in the nation draft regional ocean plan. It sets out a commendable vision that we sincerely hope will improve, not burden, the coordination of agencies with ocean jurisdictions in the Northeast. Thank you for the opportunity to comment.

Sincerely,



David Borden
Executive Director

³ Page 156. Draft Northeast Ocean Plan.