

July 25, 2016

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,

On behalf of the following Healthy Oceans Coalition's supporting organizations, we congratulate you on the first-ever regional ocean plan as envisioned in the National Ocean Policy as a way for regions, states, and tribes to come together in an organic bottom-up approach to advance ecosystem-based management and improve ocean health. As you review public comments and revise and finalize the Northeast Ocean Plan, please consider the following:

Identify and Conserve Important Ecological Areas: Important Ecological Areas (IEAs) are areas that are critical to the long-term health of New England's ocean wildlife and ecosystem. Knowing the location of these special places enables ocean resource managers, businesses and stakeholders to make better decisions about how to use and conserve our ocean. IEAs (including all five components of the IEA framework) can and must be identified, mapped and included in the Northeast Ocean Data Portal by the end of 2016, along with clear agency commitments to conserve these vitally important areas. Protecting our ecologically and economically valuable ocean wildlife and habitat should be a best practice.

Strengthen and Clarify Agency Commitments: The final plan should include strong agency commitments to implement the plan's provisions to the fullest extent consistent with the law. The plan should provide greater detail on how agencies will implement intergovernmental coordination best practices.

Provide for Meaningful Public Engagement: Public engagement is critical to the long-term success of the ocean plan. The final plan must provide clear and detailed provisions for ongoing public engagement in plan implementation. As soon as possible, the Regional Planning Body should create a Stakeholder Liaison Committee that will support and inform the plan's implementation going forward.

Understand and Plan for Climate Change: A comprehensive understanding of the vulnerability of our regional ocean ecosystem to climate change is imperative to this plan's success. The final plan should include strong provisions for collaborative research on the impacts of climate change, and future ocean planning should be conducted through this important lens. The Regional Planning Body should commit to building a comprehensive climate change information base as a theme component on the Northeast Ocean Data Portal.

Strengthen and Clarify Agency Commitments to Ocean Plan Implementation: The final plan should include strong commitments by federal decision makers to implement the plan's provisions to the fullest extent consistent with the law. The Plan should provide greater detail on how agencies will implement the intergovernmental coordination best practices.

Sincerely,

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