



Navigating the way toward ocean health

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RE: Comments on Draft Northeast Regional Ocean Plan

Dear Regional Planning Body Co-leads:

Sailors for the Sea is a leading conservation organization that educates the sailing and boating community on the importance of a healthy ocean and engages them to take action to sustain and protect our ocean ecosystem.

We applaud and fully support the regional planning initiative that has engaged recreational boaters and appreciate the opportunity to comment on the draft Northeast Ocean Plan.

For over 10 years, Sailors for the Sea has engaged the recreational boating community through high-impact, results oriented programs like our Clean Regattas Initiative, Green Boating Guide, Kids Environmental Lesson Plans (KELP) and Ocean Watch. We have certified over 900 Clean Regattas since our program's inception and worked with over 350,000 sailors. KELP has already connected more than 90,000 students to the marine environment, encouraging curiosity in our youth and giving them the tools to learn, discover, and protect our precious ocean.

Through our work, it is clear that the ocean needs our attention. Environmental challenges like plastic waste, acidification, climate change, and toxic chemicals are not only threatening marine life but our health as well. Beyond that, growing ocean industries and other developments are putting pressure on this fragile resource, and we need to work together to ensure that our actions are in the best interest of a healthy ocean ecosystem. It is with these thoughts in mind that we frame our comments to the Northeast Regional Planning Body (RPB).

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We are happy to see this regional plan take the principles outlined in the Rhode Island Special Area Management Plan, which we were engaged with, and expand them into federal waters on a regional scale. Sailors for the Sea would like to offer comments on three aspects of the draft Northeast Ocean Plan:

1. A firm commitment by the RPB to expand and update recreational boating data.
2. RPB agency commitments to long-term funding of the Northeast Ocean Data Portal.
3. A commitment to prioritize engagement of recreational boaters that may be affected by a potential proposed project.

Sailing is vitally important to Rhode Island's economy and integral to its culture. According to the 2012 Northeast Recreational Boater Survey, 907,000 boating trips on the ocean generated approximately \$3.5 billion and the equivalent of nearly 27,000 year-round jobs in the Northeast region alone. With these statistics in mind that highlight the value of recreational boating to New England, we ask the RPB to continue to characterize and update areas with high concentrations of boating activity in the region. It is our hope that this plan will help conserve these areas from large-scale offshore development. We were pleased to see studies like the Northeast Recreational Boating Survey be a priority for the Northeast, as this data and information has been lacking at large spatial scales for far too long. Our hope is that this study will be expanded upon and updated to ensure the long-term preservation of ocean recreation. We urge the RPB to hold firm on their commitments to update recreational boating data identified in Chapter Three and work to fill the data gaps associated with recreation identified in Chapter Five, specifically the data gap "to develop spatial and temporal characterizations of regional recreational activity, including studies of relationships between coastal communities, and the local economic benefits of recreational activities."¹

The Northeast Ocean Data Portal is a key component of the regional ocean plan and vital to how we as recreational ocean users see ourselves reflected in the plan. Given the importance of this data as both a reference of what is occurring in the ocean and the ability of management agencies to use the portal to engage stakeholders earlier, we strongly request the RPB commit to long-term funding and maintenance of the data portal and associated work products. This is of the utmost importance to the success of the regional ocean plan.

From our experience in Rhode Island with the SAMP, we know firsthand that early coordination and engagement with potentially affected stakeholders is critical to avoiding long-term conflicts and will likely provide the best outcome for ocean health. Thanks to the SAMP, popular buoy racing areas off Block Island are now recognized as having high value for sailing, therefore discouraging inappropriate management of the area. Specifically, the Block Island Wind Farm, a project we are supportive of, has not interfered with any of Rhode Island's famous sailing regattas. This resolution would not have been possible without the participation of local sailing organizations that helped state officials better understand the importance of the sailing industry to the state and helped the state map the areas that were most frequently used.

¹ Northeast Ocean Plan. Chapter Five. Science and Research Priority Three.

We are pleased to see similar outreach strategies being used with the Northeast Ocean Plan, but encourage even further outreach to recreational boaters. Outreach to local sailing clubs will be crucial to gathering the most reliable data, especially at detailed, local scales. We are happy to see best practices for early interagency coordination identified in the plan and, more importantly, commitments to engage recreational stakeholders early in the decision-making process. We urge the RPB to hold firm on the commitment to engage potentially affected stakeholders early in permitting processes, especially when it might affect where people sail and recreate on the water.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the draft Northeast Ocean Plan. We look forward to working with you as you develop additional data related to the sailing and boating community.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "R. Mark Davis". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

R. Mark Davis
President
Sailors for the Sea