

July 25, 2016

To the Northeast Regional Planning Body:

The Surfrider Foundation (Surfrider) appreciates this opportunity to provide comments to the Northeast Regional Planning Body (NERPB) regarding the final draft ocean plan (Plan).

Surfrider is a nonprofit environmental organization that engages a vast volunteer network of ocean users to protect the ocean, waves and beaches through conservation, activism, research, and education. We have a strong New England regional presence with local representation in each coastal state comprised of non-consumptive, low impact ocean recreation enthusiasts such as sea kayakers, surfers, swimmers, wildlife watchers, and beach goers, all working together to protect the ocean.

Surfrider commends the NERPB for its trailblazing work in developing the nation's first regional ocean plan, and we applaud the release of this final draft Plan. Surfrider fully supports the paradigm shift to ecosystem-based management of the ocean, and we offer the following comments to help strengthen the final Plan:

### **1. Public Engagement**

Robust public engagement is a cornerstone of the National Ocean Policy. To best ensure that public input and the vision our coastal communities hold for the future of New England's coast inform decision-making, Surfrider asks that you develop and integrate into this Plan clear processes for public engagement in both future planning efforts and implementation.

It is vital for the public to have a meaningful opportunity to engage in decision-making about the ocean, and to have a voice in permitting decisions for ocean use near their areas of activity. Local knowledge is an important source of expertise and can lead to more successful ocean management and enhance the legitimacy of agency decision-making. The ocean is a public resource with its own intrinsic values, and as such, agencies should be held accountable to the public for decisions that affect ecosystem health and past, present and future uses. Holding public meetings is a good starting point but does not by itself substantiate a robust public engagement process.

To enhance public engagement in the planning process, **Surfrider recommends the formation of a regionally representative and sectorally diverse standing stakeholder liaison committee (SLC) by the fall of 2016.** We urge the NERPB to assess and learn from the efforts of the Mid-Atlantic Regional Planning Body's SLC to improve upon this engagement mechanism for use in the Northeast. The SLC would be instrumental in informing the planning process and amplifying engagement opportunities across the region and all ocean uses, thereby creating greater Plan



durability and better ensuring the success of the process into the future.

The SLC should be oriented to support the NERP and inform its decisions, providing the opportunity for ongoing and crosscutting regional dialogue and information sharing among a variety of stakeholders, the public and the NERP. This is a divergence from how engagement has been orchestrated in the process thus far with the state-by-state approach, which enables stakeholders to engage with other sectors in their state but fails to provide a formal or consistent regional mechanism with set goals and processes, embracing the regionally crosscutting discussion that is essential for regional ocean planning.

To improve public engagement through implementation, **Surfrider recommends the incorporation into the Plan and best practices document of a Known Stakeholder database, organized by sector across the region to provide agencies and applicants a starting point for identifying potentially affected ocean users.** This database would provide the specific names and contact information for people, businesses, and other entities known to have currently vested interest in a given spatial area or activity. Known stakeholder data for multiple sectors were procured during the development of the Plan and via various studies, such as the Coastal and Marine Recreation Characterization Study,<sup>1</sup> and should be used, with the addition of explicit agency commitments to regularly updating the database of known stakeholders with each Plan review.

Additionally, it should be noted that the use of this Known Stakeholder database is intended as a starting point for outreach and not as a standalone measure for identifying potentially affected stakeholders. Outreach to entities on the database should include a request for those stakeholders to share the information and any subsequent engagement opportunities with their constituents. Furthermore, to increase transparency and provide the best engagement mechanism, Surfrider recommends that the NERP provide an easily accessible online form for stakeholders to opt-in for notifications across the Northeast region and interests.

## **2. Ocean Recreation & Tourism Sector Importance to Region**

Surfrider appreciates the inclusion of ocean recreation in this process, and we urge you to better emphasize in the Plan the vital role this sector plays to New England communities and our ocean economy.

Coastal recreation and tourism is the single largest contributor to the Northeast Region's ocean economy, accounting for 55% of the total coastal economy.<sup>2</sup> An anticipated 100 million person-days at over 1,000 ocean beaches will occur before

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<sup>1</sup> Point 97, SeaPlan, and the Surfrider Foundation, *Characterization of Coastal and Marine Recreational Activity in the U.S. Northeast*, prepared for the Northeast Regional Planning Body, 2015, <http://neoplan.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Recreation-National-Ocean-Economics-Program>, <http://www.oceaneconomics.org>.



Labor Day, representing roughly 10% of total annual beach visits for the entire United States.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, an estimated \$18.6 billion and over 328,000 jobs were produced in the NE by this sector in 2013.<sup>4</sup> These contributions are vital to the sustainability of New England's ocean economy and the durability of our coastal communities, and are dependent upon healthy ocean and coastal ecosystems and effective management decisions. As such, the Plan should explicitly highlight the recreation and tourism sector for the economic and sociocultural values that it contributes to the region.

**The Plan should include specific actions for filling known gaps in understanding ocean recreation and specifying deadlines and agency leads for completing additional characterization work.** One example where opportunity for improvement exists is on page 98 of the Plan, where the second recreation action indicates that the NERP will develop and incorporate additional data about recreational activities *when available*; Surfrider urges the NERP to commit more fully to this important work by assigning specific agency leads and tightening the timeline for filling this important gap.

**Surfrider additionally recommends that consistent economic estimation methodologies be utilized throughout the Plan in order to provide a true representation of industry sector contributions to our region's coastal and ocean economy.** For instance, the Plan should either provide the "sales impact" methodology or the GDP contribution "value added" methodology across all sectors. The Plan currently uses different methods across sectors, resulting in the relative contributions calculated with sales impacts becoming artificially inflated and non-comparable to sectors calculated as value added, biasing the perception of each sector's economic importance.

Additionally, **Surfrider recommends that the Plan include consistent indicators of economic contributions.** Highlighting the importance of each sector is key for accurately informing decisions. Surfrider recommends that the NERP provide consistent information for each sector (such as their employment, direct GDP contributions, and multiplier effects of GDP contributions) to help clearly represent the various economic importance of each sector, as is done in the Baseline Assessment. To provide further clarity and consistency in sector economic contribution estimates, we recommend the inclusion of a list of all coastal counties analyzed in the economic estimates of the region, and consistent inclusion of those counties across all industries and sectors.

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<sup>3</sup> Hauke Kite-Powell, Charles Colgan, Porter Hoagland, Di Jin, Vinton Valentine, and Brooke Wikgren, *Draft Northeast Ocean Planning Baseline Assessment: Marine Resources, Infrastructure, and Economics*, prepared for Northeast Regional Planning Body, 2016. <http://neoplan.org/projects/baseline-assessment>.

<sup>4</sup> ENOW, Economics: National Ocean Watch. ENOW Explorer, 2015. Estimate includes direct, indirect and induced contributions. <http://www.coast.noaa.gov/enowexplorer>



Surfrider also draws your attention to the fact that economic estimates for the five coastal New England states and five coastal counties of the Mid-Atlantic state of New York provided in the Baseline Assessment and referenced in the Plan do not align with those calculated through NOAA's ENOW database for 2013. The Baseline Assessment estimation of Ocean Economy is > than \$1.215B and 7,779 jobs over that provided by ENOW. Surfrider recommends that the reason for the difference in these calculations, and the potential of other sources used in the Baseline Assessment, be clearly documented and supported in the Plan.

In addition, recreation and tourism are tightly linked, yet the dependence of tourism expenditures on the accessibility of ocean recreation opportunities is not well documented. Additional research is needed to adequately characterize this relationship and its associated values to New England communities and our economy. Surfrider urges the NERP B to commit to developing a plan for filling this gap by 2017.

Finally, **the Plan should move beyond spatial considerations of activity to make explicit reference to the potential impacts of human activity to non-consumptive recreational uses in the coastal, nearshore and offshore areas, accounting for system-wide interconnectivity.** For example, activities affecting water quality, sand resources, wave breaks, marine habitat and beach slope have the potential to significantly degrade recreational areas, the result of which could negatively impact our regional economy and communities. While activities sometimes occur in distinctly separate spatial areas, their system-wide footprints can resonate well beyond the immediate area of activity. The recreation and tourism sector requires a healthy ocean and coastal ecosystem to thrive, and ecosystem-based management requires the NERP B to think beyond the immediate spatial imprint of a given activity and into the impacts on that space and connecting values.

### **3. Identifying Important Ecological Areas**

Identifying and protecting important ecological areas is critical to achieving the overarching goal of healthy ocean and coastal ecosystems, as well as the other two goals established by the NERP B for effective decision making and compatibility among past, present and future uses. Surfrider applauds your work in assembling the ecosystem-based management work group to develop the IEA framework, which is essential for ushering in the change in ocean management.

While such identifications will be subsequently used in different ways across ocean user groups and agencies, this initial task is vital to complete for the advancement of planning efforts and decisions affecting all ocean sectors, uses and interests. The Plan provides best practices that require public input on ocean decisions, and in the case of determining ocean activity within IEAs, this is a significant divergence from the traditional ocean management paradigm where consideration of such input is largely optional. We urge you to clearly articulate this in the Plan to enhance understanding.



**The Plan would be greatly strengthened by the inclusion of specific next steps to follow the initial IEA framework.** Surfrider urges the NERP in the final Plan to commit to and clearly articulate an open, transparent, and science-based process, including a timeline for advancing IEAs, with the goals of:

1. Identifying and posting initial data synthesis layers of each IEA component on the Northeast Ocean Data Portal by the end of 2016;
2. Updating data layers and providing a composite map of IEAs synthesizing all five components as appropriate and posting associated maps and other information on the Portal by the end of 2017 and periodically as new information becomes available; and
3. Articulating agency commitments to ensure that ocean management decisions conserve the ecosystem values and functions that the IEAs contain.

#### **4. Compatibility Assessment**

Surfrider echoes the request articulated in our additional letter to the NERP jointly signed by several environmental and ocean conservation nonprofits in encouraging the NERP to: **“include in the Plan a discussion, initial framework, and an explicit provision for the development of a robust compatibility assessment among human uses and among human uses and the marine environment.** Recommendations on how to incorporate this information into decision-making should also be developed.”

We acknowledge that some measures for the assessment of compatibility have been indirectly incorporated into the Plan, and that a region-wide scale for this work is a time-consuming undertaking. We therefore recommend that the Plan contain an explicit provision for the development of an assessment of compatibility between human uses and between human uses and the marine ecosystem, as well as recommendations for incorporating this information into decision-making.

Compatibility assessment could be undertaken at the state level for regional comparisons, rather than at the regional level, to account for variability among ecosystems, uses and cultural values and to expedite the process, allowing for states to prioritize accordingly using conservation software or other means deemed appropriate by agencies and the public.

#### **5. Referencing Data and Characterization Studies in the Plan**

Surfrider appreciated working with the NERP on the Coastal and Marine Recreation Characterization study (Study), and we applaud the integration of data procured into the Portal. We also appreciate the RPB and Portal team making appropriate modifications to how the data is referenced in the Portal to best reflect the effort and information, as well as to help identify additional gaps in understanding that need to be filled to adequately plan for the future of New England’s sea, recognizing the leading economic driver of the ocean economy – Recreation & tourism – as an integral part of decision making.



To enhance transparency in the Plan, Surfrider recommends that the NERPБ properly cite the Surfrider Foundation-SeaPlan-Point 97 project team as the contracted parties who conducted this Study under the NERPБ's direction. As an example, please refer to how the 2012 Boater Use survey is cited in the text of the Plan on page 95.

We further recommend that page 97 of the Plan be edited to best reflect the methods by which data on scuba and free diving were procured during the Study, from both the scuba diving community *and individual recreationalists*.

#### **6. Marine Debris Characterization and Reduction**

Marine debris, and in particular, plastic marine debris, is one of the most prominent threats to ocean health that humans have the ability to significantly and immediately reduce.

**Surfrider urges the NERPБ to amend the Plan to clearly convey the need for marine debris characterization and reduction.** The Plan should also include specific agency commitments and timelines for the development and integration of related data sets. This inclusion would provide a significant on-ramp for diverse ocean users to engage in the ocean planning process. The inclusion of marine debris characterization and reduction also tightly correlates with ongoing work associated with the Marine Debris Reduction Act of 2006, and is an area where existing data could easily be pulled into the Portal, with the NERPБ leveraging ongoing studies and monitoring. This data can and should be used to help inform decision-making and to help attain the three goals set forth by the NERPБ.

#### **7. Understanding Vulnerability in a Shifting Climate**

Surfrider appreciates the NERPБ's commitment to prioritizing research aiming to better understanding the impact of climate change on the ocean. **We ask that you commit to hosting an annual meeting engaging scientists, ocean users, stakeholders, and resource management communities focused on understanding our region's vulnerability in a shifting climate to best characterize vulnerability and plan for adaptation and management in a shifting environment.**

#### **8. Maintaining the Portal**

Surfrider commends the NERPБ for its commitment to maintaining the Portal, and we appreciate that some agencies have made specific commitments to maintaining certain datasets and processing updates as new products become available.

**We ask that additional language be included in the Plan that outlines more specific data priorities with corresponding agency responsibilities, and a timeline for Portal maintenance.**



### 9. **Final NERP Meeting**

Surfrider appreciates the opportunities provided to participate in the public process for the Plan's development by the NERP over the years, and **we urge you to maintain your commitment to the public process by holding a final meeting prior to submitting the Plan to the National Ocean Council (NOC).**

We recommend a full day or half-day meeting at a public space that is free of charge, for the purposes of discussion on public comments received on the Plan, and how those comments have or have not been addressed in the final version of the Plan. Such a meeting would provide a mechanism of accountability to the public for decisions the NERP is making about our coastal resources and the future of the sea in the Plan, and would further serve to garner greater buy-in from ocean users as the Plan moves forth to the NOC for review and approval.

Thank you again for your tremendous work, and for considering Surfrider's comments regarding ways to improve this precedent-setting Plan. We look forward to continual engagement in this process and Plan implementation.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in purple ink that reads "Melissa Gates".

Melissa Gates  
Northeast Regional Manager  
Surfrider Foundation  
[mgates@surfrider.org](mailto:mgates@surfrider.org) | 207.706.6378

