



THE OCEAN FOUNDATION

Coastal Coordination Program

July 22, 2016

Betsy Nicholson
Federal Co-Lead for Northeast Regional Ocean Planning
NOAA Ocean Service
Northeast Regional Office
55 Great Republic Drive
Gloucester, MA 01930-2276

Via email: klund@northeastoceancouncil.org

Re: Comments of The Ocean Foundation on the Northeast Regional Action Plan.

Dear Ms. Nicholson:

Thank you for this opportunity to provide comments in support of the work to date of the Northeast Regional Planning Body and the present iteration of the Northeast Regional Action Plan.

We believe that science-based Coastal and Marine Spatial Planning (CMSP) holds the promise to represent the important first steps toward ecosystem-based management as a foundational principle for a comprehensive overview of the ocean and coast in the Northeast Region. It is our hope that an informed stakeholder-derived CSMP process can better inform us and improve our understanding of conditions going forward, so that decisions about regional ecosystem protection and restoration, resilient adaptation to climate change and ocean acidification, and improving water quality and sustainable practices in terrestrial watersheds leading to the ocean, can proceed in the public interest.

As a primary overarching principle, we support the identification and conservation of Important Ecological Areas (IEAs) 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 we use and conserve our ocean. IEAs (including all five components of the IEA framework) should be identified, mapped and included in the Ocean Data Portal by the end of 2016, and should be supported by clear agency commitments to conserve these vitally important areas. Protecting our ecologically and economically valuable ocean wildlife and habitat should be a best practice.

We support strengthening and clarifying agency commitments and would emphasize that 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.

We support transparent and open public engagement as critical to the long-term 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 going forward.

We would emphasize the need for a comprehensive understanding of the vulnerability of our regional ocean ecosystem to climate change, as climate planning 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 Ocean Data Portal.

As the Regional Planning Body moves forward, in the context of mitigation of the acceleration of climate change and maintaining the health of living marine resources in the region, it is our hope that as part of their baseline, decisionmakers will consider the past several decades of bipartisan congressional interventions and determinations by multiple Administrations that Outer Continental Shelf oil and gas leasing would represent an unacceptable degree of risk if allowed to proceed in the study region. Similarly, based on the process of developing the NOAA Acoustical Technical Guidance (<http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/acoustics/guidelines.htm>) governing the importance of soundscapes to many forms of life in the ocean, a similar set of baseline criteria should inevitably be validated relative to any efforts to conduct seismic airgun geophysical testing for hydrocarbons in this area. We believe that protection from hydrocarbon exploration and development is the only reasonable path forward that can fully preserve the biological and cultural resources such as reefs, deep coral zones, other benthic organisms, overarching marine ecosystems, and coastal estuaries in the study region.

We fully support the long-established Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary and their work to protect keystone species within the Northeast Region. Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary represents one of the world's most famous whale study areas, with a humpback whale research history that spans more than 30 years.

The planning process for the Northeast Region should clearly also take into full account the most recent data on the critical habitat for the North Atlantic Right Whale, see: <https://www.federalregister.gov/articles/2015/02/20/2015-03389/endangered-and-threatened-species-critical-habitat-for-endangered-north-atlantic-right-whale>

We further note that other, as-yet-undefined, "habitat highways" are likely critical to the ecological integrity of the Northeast Region. Beyond these identified areas, other, less-well-known topographic features present unique or unusual structural features, including fragile outcrops and reef cavities, subsea canyons, and spawning aggregation sites. It is logical to deduce that some features may be vulnerable to certain anthropogenic impacts that alter the physical, chemical, biological, or acoustic environment.

As renewable energy proposals come forward for the Northeast Region, we strongly suggest that a precautionary approach to ocean planning for this newly-emerging industry be adhered to, one that fully anticipates - and assures reliable mitigations for - the cumulative impacts of all elements, including seafloor anchors and foundations, towers, turbines, floats, support vessel traffic, and both terrestrial and seafloor cable installations.

Baseline consideration should also be given to evidence of seafloor geo-instability in the Northeast Region, since preliminary studies to date suggest the potential presence of seafloor methane hydrate deposits in certain parts of this region. Since hydrate exploration and the eventual possibility of hydrate commercialization present unique emerging technological processes and a new range of environmental impacts, the Regional Planning Body should carefully discern the difference between proposed hydrate policies and impacts, and those of conventional oil and gas exploitation, while protecting our important marine ecosystems from both.

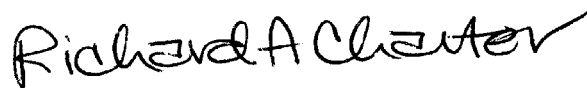
Further, we support consideration of efforts that have been underway to ultimately achieve Marine National Monument status for key features off of New England, including Cashes Ledge, Oceanographer, Gilbert, and Lydonia Canyons, and Nygren and Heezen Canyons, as well as Bear, Physalia, Mytilus and Retriever Seamounts, ancient volcanoes that rise as high as 7,700 feet above the ocean floor, the largest of which spans almost 20 miles across.

We realize that the Regional Planning Body is in the early stages of its deliberations, but we encourage this body to keep in mind that balancing permanent protection of key areas with careful management of future extractive uses such as offshore drilling and seafloor mining will be an essential component of sustainable planning for the Northeast Regional Action Plan over the longer term.

In summary, we encourage the Regional Planning Body to continue their efforts with a transparent and science-based public process. We further incorporate by reference cited documents for which links are provided herein.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on the present evolution of the Northeast Regional Action Plan.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Richard A. Charter". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Richard A. Charter
Senior Fellow
Coastal Coordination Program
The Ocean Foundation
waterway@monitor.net