

Frequently Asked Questions about the *Mid-Atlantic Regional Ocean Action Plan*

The Mid-Atlantic Regional Planning Body (RPB) was established in 2013 to design and carry out a regional planning process for the ocean waters off of the States of New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, and Virginia. Regional ocean planning provides a collaborative, data-based approach to fostering more coordinated and informed decisions about our ocean resources and the many uses that depend on them. The RPB includes representatives from the above States as well as Federal agencies, Tribes, and the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council (MAFMC).¹



The Mid-Atlantic Regional Ocean Action Plan (Plan) represents a major milestone for the regional ocean planning process and our region. It is the first regional ocean plan of its kind in the Mid-Atlantic. It was developed with input from stakeholders and scientific experts throughout the region. A draft Plan was released on July 6, 2016 for 60 days of public comment, after which the RPB considered the input received and finalized the Plan. This document answers some frequently asked questions members of the public may have about the Plan.

Q1: What is the purpose of the *Mid-Atlantic Regional Ocean Action Plan*?

- A1:** The Plan is the result of over three years of collaborative planning to address complex ocean management challenges and advance the two goals of the Mid-Atlantic RPB:
- Promote ocean ecosystem health, functionality, and integrity through conservation, protection, enhancement, and restoration.
 - Plan and provide for existing and emerging ocean uses in a sustainable manner that minimizes conflicts, improves effectiveness and regulatory predictability, and supports economic growth.

It details a set of best practices and specific collaborative actions that the RPB member entities will take to advance these goals.

Q2: How will the Plan be used?

- A2:** The Plan will provide tools, information, and processes that enhance the capacity of Federal, State, and Tribal entities and the MAFMC to carry out their missions, work together more effectively, and serve the needs of stakeholders in the region. The Plan does not change existing authorities or create new mandates at the Federal, State, and Tribal levels. Rather, actions within the Plan aim to improve the effectiveness of Federal, State, Tribal, and MAFMC

¹ See: <http://www.boem.gov/Environmental-Stewardship/Mid-Atlantic-Regional-Planning-Body/index.aspx> for detailed MidA-RPB membership information.

implementation of their respective responsibilities in the ocean waters off of the Mid-Atlantic region.

Q3: How is this version of the Plan different from the public release draft?

A3: After a 60 day public comment period during the summer of 2016, the RPB reviewed thousands of written public comments (which are posted on the [MidA RPB website](#)) and verbal input received during a series of open house public listening sessions hosted by MARCO. The majority of public comments focused on ecologically rich areas, authority of the Plan, support for the best practices, support for and clarifications about the Mid-Atlantic Ocean Data Portal (Data Portal), the role of the RPB during implementation, enhancing stakeholder engagement, and performance monitoring and evaluation. Informed by that public input, the RPB considered edits to the draft Plan. A document entitled *Response to Public Comments on the Draft Mid-Atlantic Regional Ocean Action Plan* was prepared as a companion document to the final Plan and released in November 2016. It describes major themes of the comments received, as well as the RPB's responses to those comment themes, including any Plan text edits that were made as a result. The *Response to Public Comments* can be viewed at this link: boem.gov/Ocean-Action-Plan/.

Q4: Where can I get a copy of the Plan?

A4: The Plan is available online at this link: boem.gov/Ocean-Action-Plan/.

Q5: How was the public engaged in the development of this Plan?

A5: The RPB has prepared a thorough *Stakeholder Engagement Report* that details over 100 public engagement opportunities convened over the course of developing the Plan, from April 2013 through Plan finalization in November 2016. The report can be accessed here: boem.gov/Ocean-Action-Plan/.

Q6: Under what circumstances will the RPB amend the Plan?

A6: The RPB will routinely review implementation progress, assess the need for Plan updates or amendments, and make updates or amendments as needed. The process of amendment will include robust public engagement and notice, pursuant to applicable Federal law.

Q7: What are the next steps for the RPB after finalizing the Plan?

A7: The RPB is now transitioning to implementation of the Plan. This will include drafting a work plan to describe more specifically how and on what timeline actions in the Plan will be carried out. The RPB may choose to develop working groups to focus on specific actions. Public engagement will continue to be a priority during work plan development and Plan implementation. The full RPB has committed to continuing to meet as a group in a public setting at least once per year.

Q8: Are other regions also developing regional ocean plans?

A8: In October, 2016 the Northeast Regional Planning Body released the Northeast Ocean Plan. A number of other regions have established regional planning bodies to pursue ocean planning, and are working on development of their ocean plans (e.g., the West Coast and the Pacific Islands).

Q9: How will the RPB support implementation?

A9: The RPB recognizes that support is necessary for Plan implementation and to effectively administer the RPB's oversight role. The Plan will be implemented primarily by Federal and State agencies, Tribal Governments, and the MAFMC through the operations of their existing staff and programs because actions in the Plan are directly supportive of their missions. Where additional resources may be required to address specific actions, RPB members may draw on networks of partners, existing initiatives, and public-private partnership models that engage relevant sectors and interests. Leveraging existing and partner resources will be a primary focus of RPB efforts. If necessary, the RPB may update implementation commitments to reflect available resources and capacity.

Q10: Will the Plan change any laws or regulations?

A10: No. The Mid-Atlantic RPB does not have authority to change any laws or regulations.

Q11: What types of commitments are in the Plan?

A11: The Plan reflects the commitment of Federal, State, and Tribal governments and MAFMC to work together in specific ways, informed by stakeholder input and perspectives, to address regional ocean management opportunities and challenges. Best practices described in section 2.1 of the Plan include commitments to share and consider data and information, participate in earlier coordination among agencies, coordinate with stakeholders, and coordinate among Federal, State, Tribal, and MAFMC partners. In addition, in order to specifically address the RPB's goals and objectives, there are 44 actions described in the Plan. They address healthy ocean ecosystems, sustainable ocean uses, science and research, and performance monitoring and evaluation.

Q12: Who will use the Data Portal and how will it be useful?

A12: Anyone can use the [Data Portal](#). It is available to the public. The Data Portal is a central resource for accessing publicly available spatial data about our ocean. The Plan includes RPB entity commitments to use the Data Portal, among other sources of information, and encourages others to refer to it when they are proposing to take ocean-related actions. While final decisions about proposed ocean activities will continue to rest with the existing management and regulatory authorities, the RPB believes the Data Portal and the RPB's commitment to use it as a non-exclusive source of information will lead to better shared understanding of: (1) who might be affected by a given proposed activity and (2) help with initial considerations about whether a particular site makes sense for that activity. It offers a way for everyone to get on the same page with consistent information earlier in the proposal process. Private sector stakeholders are both welcomed and encouraged to use the Data Portal as a tool in initial planning for activities they may want to undertake.

Q13: What is going to change as a result of this Plan?

A13: There are several ways that governmental processes will improve as a result of this Plan, which will also benefit ocean users and other stakeholders. For example, the Plan and Data Portal provide materials that will help agencies and project proponents reduce time and effort associated with the environmental permitting process, including:

- An extraordinary amount of newly accessible data and derived products that represent marine life and human activities, developed in collaboration with, and vetted for publication and use by a wide range of agencies, subject-matter experts, and stakeholders. Increased information in the Data Portal will serve as a central location for agencies and project proponents alike to reference and consider, resulting in a common data vocabulary for discussions about ocean projects.
- Best practices that enhance governmental use of these newly accessible data and support better coordination and communication among agencies, project proponents, and stakeholders. Agencies are committing to working better together, with States, Tribes, stakeholders, and the MAFMC.
- Coordinated actions that will provide technical products and outreach to support permitting and management decisions.

Q14: Are agencies required to comply with actions described in the Plan?

A14: Executive Order 13547 clearly identifies Federal agencies' responsibilities in the context of regional ocean plans, including agencies taking actions that are consistent with regional plans, to the extent those actions are consistent with existing authorities. More on specific commitments can be found in Chapters Two, Three, and Four of the Plan. National Ocean Council concurrence with the final Plan represents senior Federal department-level commitment to the Plan. Plan implementation is voluntary for the States and Tribes. Federal, State, and Tribal agencies themselves were key authors of many of the actions in the Plan. They worked to ensure that the actions complement existing missions and programs.