

## Frequently Asked Questions about the *Draft 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).<sup>1</sup>



The Draft Mid-Atlantic Regional Ocean Action Plan (draft 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. The draft Plan was released on July 6, 2016 for 60 days of public comment. Public comments are strongly welcomed and encouraged. Comments are due by September 6, 2016. After this date, the RPB will consider public comments and finalize the Plan. This document answers some frequently asked questions members of the public may have about the draft Plan.

[boem.gov/Ocean-Action-Plan/](http://boem.gov/Ocean-Action-Plan/)

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

**A1:** The draft Plan is the result of three years of collaborative planning efforts to address complex ocean management challenges and advance the two goals of the Mid-Atlantic RPB: promoting a healthy ocean ecosystem and planning and providing for sustainable ocean uses in the Mid-Atlantic region.

**Q2: How can stakeholders comment on the draft Plan?**

**A2:** The draft Plan can be accessed here: [www.boem.gov/Ocean-Action-Plan/](http://www.boem.gov/Ocean-Action-Plan/). The public may provide input on the draft Plan by September 6, 2016 by emailing comments to [MidAtlanticRPB@boem.gov](mailto:MidAtlanticRPB@boem.gov) or mailing comments to:

Robert P. LaBelle  
Federal Co-Lead, Mid-Atlantic Regional Planning Body  
BOEM  
45600 Woodland Road  
Mailstop: VAM-BOEM DIR

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

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.boem.gov/MidA-RPB-Meetings/> for more information about this webinar.

The RPB will also conduct a public webinar on July 11, 2016,<sup>2</sup> and the Mid-Atlantic Regional Council on the Ocean (MARCO) is working with the RPB to host a series of in-person open house public listening sessions<sup>3</sup> and participate in stakeholder meetings throughout the region during the summer 2016 to present the draft Plan for public comment.

**Q3: What is the process for finalizing the draft Plan?**

A3: The RPB is seeking public input through written feedback on the draft Plan by September 6, 2016. The RPB will consider all public comments received and revise the draft Plan as needed. The RPB plans to submit the revised final Plan to the National Ocean Council in fall 2016.

**Q4: How will the final Plan be used?**

A4: The Plan will provide tools, information, and processes that enhance the capacity of Federal, State, and Tribal entities and 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 implementation of their respective responsibilities in the ocean waters off of the Mid-Atlantic region.

**Q5: Under what circumstances will the RPB amend the Plan?**

A5: 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.

**Q6: What are the next steps for the RPB after finalizing the Plan?**

A6: Once the Plan is finalized, the RPB will transition to implementation. 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. The full RPB has committed to continuing to meet as a group at least once per year.

**Q7: Are other regions also developing ocean plans?**

A7: The Northeast Regional Planning Body has developed the draft Northeast Ocean Plan, which will be finalized this year as well. A number of other regions have established regional planning bodies to pursue ocean planning, and are still working on development of their ocean plans (e.g., the West Coast and the Pacific Islands).

**Q8: What resources does the RPB have for implementation?**

A8: The RPB recognizes that resources are necessary for Plan implementation and to effectively administer the RPB's oversight role. The Plan will be implemented primarily by Federal and

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<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.boem.gov/MidA-RPB-Meetings/> for more information about this webinar.

<sup>3</sup> For more information on the open house public listening sessions, see: <http://midatlanticocean.org/upcoming-release-of-draft-mid-atlantic-ocean-action-plan/>

State agencies and Tribal Governments 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 of 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.

**Q9: Will the Plan change any laws or regulations?**

A9: No. The Mid-Atlantic RPB does not have authority to change any laws or regulations.

**Q10: What is the purpose of identifying ecologically rich areas (ERAs)?**

A10: Identifying ERAs will deepen our understanding of important areas of the Mid-Atlantic ocean ecosystem in order to help inform decision making under existing authorities. The process for identifying these areas and then developing factual reports about them is generally described in section 2.3 of the draft Plan. However, it is important to emphasize that the general process outlined in the draft Plan will continue to be refined during the Plan implementation phase in response to further input from stakeholders and scientific experts in the region. The RPB welcomes public input about this action and encourages the public to provide those ideas through submission of public comments.

**Q11: What types of commitments are in the plan?**

A11: The draft 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 draft 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 draft 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 open to the public. The Data Portal is a central resource for accessing publicly available spatial data about our ocean. The draft Plan includes Federal agency 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-relation 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 its 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 government processes will improve as a result of this Plan, and those 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 to begin from.
- Best Practices that enhance the 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 stakeholders, with States, and with Tribes.
- Actions that will provide technical products and outreach to support permitting and management decisions.

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

A14: Executive Order 13547 clearly identifies Federal agencies’ responsibilities in the context of these kinds of regional 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 draft Plan. National Ocean Council concurrence with the final Plan will represent senior department-level commitment to the Plan. Federal agencies themselves were key authors of many of the actions in the draft Plan. They worked to ensure that the actions complement existing missions and programs.