

NEWS

Draft U.S. Ocean Policy Plan Precedes Proposal to Move NOAA to Interior Department

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The Obama administration's ambitious plan to protect oceans was released on 12 January, just 1 day prior to the administration's apparently unrelated announcement of a proposed governmental reorganization that would move the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) from the Department of Commerce to the Department of the Interior. The proposed NOAA move is part of a larger administration proposal to consolidate six federal agencies that are focused on business and trade into one department. The action is contingent upon congressional approval.

The proposal to move NOAA to the Interior department has prompted a variety of reactions, with some considering it common sense to group agencies dealing with natural resources in the same department. Others have charged that the proposed move could blunt NOAA's leading role in protecting oceans, among other concerns.

The draft National Ocean Policy Implementation Plan, issued by the White House's National Ocean Council, provides a framework for more than 2 dozen federal agencies and offices involved with oceans to work together on a plan to implement the National Ocean Policy. President Barack Obama established that policy—formally known as the National Policy for the Stewardship of the Ocean, Our Coasts, and the Great Lakes—through a 19 July 2010 executive order. An earlier 2004 report by the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy had received bipartisan support.

The draft plan, which lays out nine priority objectives along with more than 50 action items and nearly 300 significant milestones with timetables, has a strong focus on science and the need for increased observations. The objectives include adopting ecosystem-based management "as a foundational principle" for ocean management. For the objective on informing decisions and increasing understanding to improve management and policy decisions, action items include advancing fundamental scientific knowledge through exploration and research, and providing data and tools to support science-based decision making and ecosystem-based management.

Among the action items for an objective on observations, mapping, and infrastructure are improving remote sensing systems and further implementing the U.S. Integrated Ocean Observing System (IOOS). Other objectives call for improved coordination and support for ocean management issues,

establishing and implementing an integrated ecosystem protection and restoration strategy, strengthening resiliency and adaptation to climate change and ocean acidification, enhancing water quality and implementing sustainable practices on land, addressing environmental stewardship needs in the Arctic Ocean, and implementing comprehensive coastal and marine spatial planning and management.

The draft plan notes that it creates no new regulations, attempts to leverage existing federal agency resources, and was prepared in light of expected federal budgets for the next several years.

"For the first time in the history of this country, we have a national policy that pertains to the 70% of the planet that we call the oceans. We never had that before," Jerry Miller, assistant director for ocean sciences at the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP), told *Eos*. Miller said that while the National Ocean Council has a long-term vision for managing oceans, "this document is intended to be the sort of boots on the ground, [to] get on with business in the foreseeable future here in a realistic fashion with budget levels that we can reasonably expect."

Both Miller and Steve Fetter, who oversees OSTP's environment and energy division, said the concept of science-based decision making and having the necessary data are fundamental to the plan. Fetter told *Eos* that the main message in the plan is "the commitment to using the best available scientific information and analysis to inform all of our policies and programs regarding the oceans and the coasts." Fetter added that "everything else [in the plan] is in support of that."

Reaction to the Draft Implementation Plan

The draft plan has received a generally favorable response. Former NOAA administrator Conrad Lautenbacher told *Eos* that he is pleased to see the release of the draft plan and "look[s] forward even more to the application of resources to the goals outlined. In particular, the importance of an Earth observing system stands out as a prerequisite to realize just about every part of the plan." Lautenbacher said he supports additional resources for fulfilling IOOS goals as a critical system within the Global Earth Observation System of Systems.

Margaret Leinen, chair of the Ocean Research Advisory Panel, which provides guidance to the U.S. government about ocean research, told *Eos* the plan "is important because it will provide both guidance

and prioritization to all federal agencies and programs that are involved with ocean affairs. For the research community, this plan is intended to provide clear guidance on the types of research most needed by the federal government."

Antonio Busalacchi, director of the Earth System Science Interdisciplinary Center (ESSIC) at the University of Maryland, College Park, cited as the most important aspects of the report a call for coordination among agencies focused on oceans, a regional approach to implementing policies that recognizes that "one size doesn't fit all," and a recognition of the importance of observations for research and for operational needs.

Environmental groups applauded the plan. Jeff Watters, senior manager of government relations with the Ocean Conservancy, told *Eos* that although he "would clearly love to see more federal dollars going toward ocean conservation issues," he recognizes that the purpose of this particular plan is not to be a giant conservation wish list. "This [plan] is about management of the agencies and management of resources," he said, "to make sure we are going about ocean management and ocean research in a smart and targeted way that is frankly more effective and more efficient."

Staci Lewis, senior policy manager with the Consortium for Ocean Leadership, said she is looking for the final plan to strike a balance between tight budgetary times and proceeding with a number of key action items. "Hopefully, they are able to translate these [plan] milestones into tangible results while keeping the budgetary issues in mind," she said.

Support for the draft plan was not universal, however. National Ocean Industries Association president Randall Luthi said in a statement that "the use of Coastal Marine Spatial Planning may very well be a multilayered bureaucratic solution seeking a problem that doesn't exist. Our industry has been successfully operating for decades, without major conflict, guided by the planning already inherent in the 5-year offshore leasing process mandated under the Outer Continental Shelf Lands Act." U.S. Rep. Doc Hastings (R-Wash.) charged that the plan would help the administration move forward with "imposing new mandatory 'ocean zoning.'" Hastings said the plan "isn't about protecting the ocean; it's about expanding power and government control over Americans' lives."

Hastings's comments "reflect politics at its rawest," said Morgan Gopnik, former senior advisor to the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy. She said Hastings's charges about expanding power and government control are neither accurate nor relevant to the plan. "There is nothing radical about these proposals; they are common sense. The new policy will make ocean management more efficient and less [Washington] D.C.-centric, with lots of input from state, local, and tribal authorities." Miller at OSTP added that coastal and marine spatial planning "is not ocean zoning, it's ocean planning" that

brings together a broad spectrum of stakeholders in a collaborative planning process.

NOAA's Proposed Move

During a 13 January briefing, Jeff Zients of the White House Office of Management and Budget said that all of NOAA would be moved to the Interior department under the administration proposal. "As part of the specific proposal that would be developed once we have consolidation authority, the appropriate integration of NOAA into the Interior department would be carefully worked through."

Sarah Chasis, director of the Natural Resources Defense Council's Ocean Initiative, said the proposed move for NOAA was "a side issue" in the proposed reorganization, with the principal focus being on business and trade agencies. Chasis told *Eos* that while the draft implementation plan is a positive and important step forward for ocean stewardship, the proposal to move NOAA to Interior is troubling. She said NOAA currently plays an important role in checks and balances with Interior, which has responsibility for extractive offshore oil and gas activities. "Making sure that [NOAA is] free to weigh in in a way that's not squelched or unduly influenced by the extraction goals of [Interior] is really important," she said, adding, "We need to focus on implementing the National Ocean Policy plan. There are so many important things to be done, and reorganization takes a lot of time and effort and diverts from policy and implementation."

Jeb Berman, director of government relations with the National Marine Sanctuary Foundation, said NOAA was "blindsided" by

the reorganization announcement and had not been informed about it until the prior evening. Berman told *Eos* that moving the entire agency to Interior "creates so much bureaucratic headache and would require NOAA to take its eye off the ball for a significant period of time. And even though they've fixed some of the oil/gas problems recently at [Interior], it's still the agency that's directed to lease expeditiously." He added, "Now, if some pieces of NOAA were integrated into existing resource management functions at [Interior], that could potentially make sense."

Busalacchi of ESSIC said he is withholding judgment for now regarding the proposed move. "On the plus side in terms of management of ecosystems, it seems to make sense. Similarly with climate services, over the past 1.5 years NOAA and [Interior] have had many discussions regarding interagency coordination pertaining to climate, impacts, information, and services. However, when it comes to the operational prediction and observation components of NOAA, it would appear these represent significant new mandates for [Interior]."

Former NOAA administrator Lautenbacher commented, "I think it is premature to assume that NOAA will be transferred to Interior. There are certainly other options which many have proposed over the years. The president's announcement on Friday asks Congress to reinstate presidential authority to make organizational changes within the executive branch, an authority which ended in the Reagan era. The example of how such authority might be used centered on the consolidation of six

current disparate organizations that affect trade and the economy. I certainly agree that bringing together these various structures would be a logical and useful undertaking. And I do believe that streamlining executive branch organizational structure, if done properly, could be highly advantageous to improving the efficiency and effectiveness of government."

He added, though, "At this point, it is pure speculation as to what the effect would be on the current Commerce department lineup and, in particular, NOAA. I do continue to support strongly the enactment of an organic act for NOAA no matter what happens in the future. As to the proper home for NOAA in a future government reorganization, I would have to see the details and overall context of the change before I could make a determination as to [its] value and my support for such a change. Remember, there is a long way to go before any of this potential reorganization activity can even begin to be formulated and seriously proposed, let alone actually happening."

Miller of OSTP noted, "We don't anticipate any impact [from the proposed NOAA move] on the implementation plan." As *Eos* went to press, NOAA had not made any public comments regarding the proposed reorganization, despite attempts by *Eos* to solicit agency comments.

For more information about the draft National Ocean Policy Implementation Plan, see <http://www.whitehouse.gov/administration/eop/oceans/implementationplan>. The public comment period is open through 27 February 2012.

—RANDY SHOWSTACK, Staff Writer