

Approach to the Mid-Atlantic Ocean Action Plan

Introduction

The purpose of this document is to propose an approach to the Mid-Atlantic Ocean Action Plan (OAP). The Mid-Atlantic Regional Planning Body (MidA RPB or RPB) deliberated on and approved this approach at its in-person meeting on January 21-22, 2015 in New York, New York. Appended to this document is a draft OAP outline that was discussed at the RPB meeting, although a decision about that draft outline was not sought at that time. The MidA RPB expects the draft outline to be modified as work proceeds and the RPB learns more about the Mid-Atlantic ocean ecosystem, ocean uses, and various tools available for planning.

In May 2014, a MidA RPB internal workgroup was established to consider options for the type of OAP that would be practical for the region, enhance current ocean management, and satisfy the diverse interests of Mid-Atlantic ocean stakeholders. Five plan types (referred to as Options A-E) that fell across a spectrum of approaches ranging from process-oriented to geographically-oriented were considered. These options were released for public consideration and input in October 2014. Feedback received in written form and through a series of public listening sessions included support for various specific elements of the proposed draft options, development of a hybrid approach that can address both region-wide and geographically-specific opportunities, and further analysis of ecological and economic ocean resources of the Mid-Atlantic to inform planning and management. The RPB also heard concerns from stakeholders regarding the need to ensure RPB actions are appropriate and achievable under existing authorities and are identified and implemented with sufficient stakeholder input and support. Given this feedback, the workgroup combined the preferred ideas from each option into the approach proposed in this document.

By participating in the regional ocean planning process and working collaboratively to develop an OAP, MidA RPB member entities have agreed to: participate in the planning process; work collaboratively to develop an OAP; build on and complement existing programs, partnerships, and initiatives; and commit to following the plan to the extent that it is consistent with existing authorities. The purpose and mission of the RPB are further described in the *Charter for the Mid-Atlantic Regional Planning Body*, available on the RPB website at <http://www.boem.gov/MidA-RPB-Charter/>.

It is important to remember that, in accordance with the [National Ocean Policy](#), “regional planning bodies are not regulatory bodies and have no independent legal authority to regulate or otherwise direct Federal, State, Tribal, or local government actions. All activities will continue to be regulated under existing authorities.”

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The approach to the OAP would support the goals and objectives for Mid-Atlantic regional ocean planning set forth in the *Mid-Atlantic Regional Ocean Planning Framework* (Framework), available on the RPB website at www.boem.gov/Mid-Atlantic-Regional-Ocean-Planning-Framework/. It would be grounded in existing data and analysis, as well as new data and analysis and stakeholder input. The MidA RPB is aiming to reach consensus on a first iteration OAP by the end of 2016.

Under the approved OAP approach, the RPB would identify and implement interjurisdictional actions (i.e., agencies working more closely together across organizations). Enhanced coordination would increase information sharing, improve interagency coordination, and could inform more holistic and coherent decision making on a regional basis going forward. The actions would help MidA RPB member entities achieve Framework goals and objectives under existing authorities and practices. MidA RPB collaboration on these actions would be pursued through both a region-wide approach and, in some situations, within specific geographic areas as follows:

- *An initial limited number of region-wide interjurisdictional actions* would be pursued by addressing four basic categories of opportunities: (1) identifying research needs; (2) informing and improving management decisions; (3) improving information for environmental and regulatory review; and (4) leveraging resources. Region-wide actions would be identified in coordination with neighboring regions in recognition of the fact that human activities, marine life, and other key components of the marine system cross regional boundaries.
- *An initial limited number of specific geographic areas* would be identified that would benefit from enhanced information and interagency coordination to inform improved decision making. These areas should be selected because they can potentially demonstrate progress on region-wide interjurisdictional issues, and other criteria such as:
 - significant ecological value
 - socio-economic value
 - areas of high current or potential user conflict

As appropriate, the RPB would delineate the boundaries of these specific geographic areas and spatial information would enhance the RPB's understanding of important characteristics of and activities in those areas. Specific potential interagency actions and improvements to decision making processes would then be identified for those areas. These specific actions and process improvements would be identified based on the specific needs and characteristics of each area and would be informed by input from stakeholders.

In addressing both specific region-wide actions and geographies, the MidA RPB would:

- **Clarify criteria:** Document criteria and processes for choosing the initial region-wide interjurisdictional actions and specific geographic areas. For example, consideration

should be given to the regional applicability of issues, breadth of RPB member entities affected, potential transferability of lessons to be learned, etc.

- **Analyze compatibility:** Strive to enhance compatibility among ocean uses and between uses and ecosystem health objectives. This may involve use of one or more types of compatibility assessment to inform decision making, and the OAP would potentially include commitments to use resulting products to inform decision making under existing authorities. The specific types of assessments and how information resulting from them would be used to inform decision making have yet to be determined.
- **Improve collective understanding:** Seek a better, shared understanding of the Mid-Atlantic ocean including human uses, natural resources, the ecosystem services the ocean provides, and important and sensitive habitats by clearly delineating and documenting those in a manner that stakeholders, ocean resource managers, and other decision makers can use to inform decision making going forward. The specific types of data and analysis and exactly how those would inform decision making have yet to be determined.

Notes:

- The process steps and timeline for identifying region-wide interjurisdictional coordination opportunities and actions and specific geographic areas, which would include stakeholder input, have not yet been determined. These will be reflected in a MidA RPB work plan in early 2015.
- In further iterations of the OAP, additional region-wide interjurisdictional coordination opportunities and actions and specific geographic areas would potentially be identified and included in the planning effort.

Appendix: Draft Outline of Proposed Approach

*This appendix provides an illustration of how the structure of a plan might appear under the proposed approach and an annotated description of each possible section. **This outline was not approved by the RPB at the January 21-22, 2015 meeting**, but rather will remain open to refinement over the course of 2015-2016, and the MidA RPB will continue to welcome public input on it. Each component of the outline can draw from and integrate with existing and ongoing data gathering and planning efforts, and would inform decision making under existing authorities. A complete draft of a first iteration OAP would be available for review by the end of 2016, and the OAP would be reviewed and updated periodically.*

Introduction to the OAP

The OAP would begin with brief framing and context describing the regional ocean planning process. This would include some description and explanation of how the RPB's work fits within the context of existing state and regional priorities, authorities, partnerships, and planning efforts.

Mid-Atlantic Framework for Regional Ocean Planning

The goals and objectives established in the *Mid-Atlantic Framework for Regional Ocean Planning* (Framework) would be reiterated here.

Regional Ocean Assessment

Regional Ocean Assessment (ROA) is an ongoing effort to compile best available information on ocean uses and resources in the Mid-Atlantic. The ROA would be a companion product to the OAP, and would live primarily in digital format and include narrative descriptions, summaries of key concepts, spatial data where applicable, and links to further information. It is structured according to the goals and objectives identified in the Framework and will be updated over time.

Data Analyses and Decision Support Tools

To support the planning process, the MidA RPB will, pending resources, consider conducting additional analyses to understand areas of ecological importance, characterize the Mid-Atlantic marine economy, examine compatibility among resources and uses, etc. These kinds of additional analyses could improve understanding about the interactions between and among ocean uses and resources in the Mid-Atlantic, serve as a bridge between the ROA and OAP, and provide the RPB with information it needs to determine meaningful interjurisdictional coordination actions to improve management of ecological resources and economic activities. More information about potential analyses for consideration is provided in a separate document entitled [Potential Data Analyses and Decision Support Tools](#).

Interjurisdictional Coordination Opportunities and Actions

This section would include:

- Narrative and spatial description of the region-wide interjurisdictional opportunities and actions and key geographies identified by the MidA RPB.
- Articulation of RPB member entity commitments to use the information in the OAP and Mid-Atlantic Ocean Data Portal (Data Portal) and improve business practices to address those region-wide actions and specific geographies.

RPB member entity commitments would focus on:

- Enhanced coordination among Federal, State, and Tribal entities.
- The use of existing and new data and information from the Data Portal and other sources (e.g., ROA and additional analyses) to achieve MidA RPB Framework goals and objectives under existing authorities.

Coordinated actions and use of information could address four basic categories of opportunities: (1) identifying research needs; (2) informing and improving management decisions; (3) improving information for environmental and regulatory review; and (4) leveraging resources.

More information about interjurisdictional coordination including a proposed process, criteria, and examples of potential interjurisdictional actions are presented in [*Draft Process, Criteria, and Examples of Potential Interjurisdictional Coordination Actions*](#), which is included in the meeting materials for the January 21-22, 2015 meeting.

Plan Updates

This section would describe the process for updating the OAP periodically. The OAP would be reviewed and updates would be considered periodically with additional and/or refined information, new and/or refined region-wide actions and specific geographies, and commitments made in the OAP to address them. Major outcomes of various assessments and analyses would be reviewed and updates would be considered periodically, or as indicated by changed circumstances and data. Minor process and data improvements could be ongoing throughout implementation. The appropriate timeframe for updating the OAP would need to be determined.

Monitoring Strategy

Progress made would be evaluated through the development of metrics and criteria agreed upon by the RPB. The monitoring strategy would be described in this section of the OAP.

Stakeholder Engagement Plan (possibly as appendix to OAP)

A stakeholder engagement plan would be developed in early 2015, in conjunction with an RPB work plan, to guide meaningful stakeholder engagement throughout the development of the OAP in 2015 and 2016. In the OAP itself, ongoing key stakeholder engagement commitments

and opportunities would be articulated to show how the RPB plans to sustain stakeholder engagement throughout implementation.

RPB Member Institution Capacities and Authorities (possibly as appendix to OAP)

An additional appendix could include a description of the capacities and authorities of each RPB member entity.

RPB Charter (possibly as appendix to OAP)