

States' Map For Saving The Oceans

By Leon E. Panetta and James D. Watkins
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Buried beneath the headlines about warming oceans, harmful algae blooms and dwindling seafood stocks is the fact that it is within our power to make immediate, measurable progress toward solving the problems facing our oceans. Innovative state leaders are showing us the way, and the federal government needs to follow their example.

Over the past three years, California, acting to preserve a vital state resource, has developed an Ocean Action Plan; launched the most comprehensive approach to marine protected areas in the nation; and invested more than \$30 million in projects to improve water quality, protect ocean habitats and manage sand on its beaches. In the past year, at least 18 states have taken similar steps. Regional, bipartisan alliances were formed to protect the waters, shores, species and economies of the Gulf of Mexico, New York, Puget Sound and the West Coast.

In all of these instances, governors prioritized ocean management and set aside individual state concerns to develop a more effective plan to manage the region's oceans and coasts.

The considerable strides the states and regions made last year in ocean governance earned an A-minus on the Joint Ocean Commission Initiative's latest report card on U.S. ocean policy. That is in stark contrast to the C-minus earned by the nation as a whole. When it comes to managing our oceans, the United States is barely treading water, threatening not only the survival of ocean life but also the lives and livelihoods of those who depend on the ocean as a food source and economic engine.

Our country's C-minus represents a modest improvement from the previous year's grade, a D-plus. The improvement is largely attributable to state action and a few notable federal accomplishments. For instance, passage of the Magnuson-Stevens Fisheries Conservation and Management Act set a firm deadline to end overfishing and will ensure a more scientific approach to fisheries management. The administration's designation of the Northwest Hawaiian Islands Marine National Monument provides important safeguards to 140,000 square miles of ocean and island bounty, and the release of a new national ocean research strategy provides a platform for advancing ocean sciences.

In most respects, though, the federal government and Congress lag behind states in efforts to protect our oceans. And the failure to commit funding and to reform national and international policy for the long-term preservation of our oceans will hamper additional progress in the states.

It's impossible to effectively manage our oceans without the research necessary to fully understand the complex processes of an ocean ecosystem. Nowhere is this more apparent than with climate change. It's no secret that the oceans and climate are deeply linked -- the oceans store vast amounts of energy in the form of heat and are a sink for much of the carbon dioxide emitted over the past century. Yet while sophisticated atmospheric monitoring systems have been in place for decades, only rudimentary systems exist for our

oceans. This leaves us trying to fight climate change with one hand tied behind us. The only way to understand and respond to devastating climate change is with important tools such as an Integrated Ocean Observing System, which the administration's new ocean research plan recommended on Jan. 26.

Unfortunately, even the best-laid plans to preserve the oceans remain empty rhetoric when Congress and the administration fail to commit the funds necessary for implementation. For the second year in a row, federal funding for oceans was stagnant. The Joint Ocean Commission Initiative estimates that a \$750 million investment would be a significant step forward for such research as the integrated observing system and management programs like the Magnuson-Stevens Act. Such an investment would protect an ecosystem that represents 95 percent of the habitable living space on the planet and supports ocean-dependent businesses that generate more than \$138 billion each year.

The federal government can learn the most from the states by emulating their willingness to heed the advice of environmental and industry experts who say that collaboration is the key to preserving the vital resources in our oceans. The United States is one of the few nations that have failed to accede to the U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea, essentially a global-scale version of our various regional alliances. Joining the convention would ensure the United States a stake in decisions that affect the health of our oceans, economy and security.

The states have outpaced the federal government on ocean protection for years. It's time for the administration and Congress to dive in. By committing increased science and management funding and supporting the collaborative leadership described above, we can immediately begin to reverse the decline in our oceans.

The writers are co-chairmen of the Joint Ocean Commission Initiative.

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