

**Northeast Regional Ocean Council
Ocean Planning Committee
2022 – 2023 Work Plan**

The Ocean Planning Committee (OPC) is one of NROC's three standing committees. The goal of the OPC is to enhance decision making, improve ocean and coastal ecosystem health, and reduce conflicts. The OPC advances this goal by providing support for and coordinating across ocean planning, management, and regulatory activities.

The OPC originally convened when individual New England states were developing ocean plans in response to proposals for new offshore activities, including offshore liquified natural gas (LNG) terminals and renewable energy installations. In 2009, NROC and partners established the [Northeast Ocean Data Portal](#) (Portal) to provide data and information to support planning, permitting, and siting activities. From 2010 through 2017, the OPC supported the establishment and operations of the Northeast Regional Planning Body, which developed and began implementing the 2016 Northeast Ocean Plan. In 2018, the OPC was re-established to include states, federal agencies, tribes, and the New England Fishery Management Council with the intent of continuing support for offshore planning, management, and regulatory actions by providing a regional forum for coordination, providing data and information via the Portal, and developing and communicating best practices for decision-making. In 2021, NROC, in partnership with the Mid-Atlantic Regional Council on the Ocean (MARCO), was selected to be the host of the Regional Wildlife Science Entity (RWSE) – a new partnership among the states, federal agencies, environmental groups, and the offshore wind industry to coordinate science and monitoring related to wildlife and offshore wind on the Atlantic coast.

Planning for new and existing activities and the coordination of science and monitoring is occurring at many scales in New England, including regionally. This includes offshore wind leasing and project development, energy transmission, telecommunications, aquaculture, waterways management and navigation, wildlife and fisheries research, fisheries management, and dredged material disposal. The OPC has also identified habitat conservation and sand and sediment management as emerging ocean issues. Management, regulation, and planning for these activities occur in separate venues and processes that are dictated by specific regulatory mandates. The OPC remains the only venue in the region where informal coordination can occur across such a wide range of regulatory and management topics. NROC and OPC have also acknowledged broader, cross-cutting issues that affect ocean management, particularly climate change and diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice. The following work plan describes how the OPC intends to support planning for these activities through 2023.

Goal: Provide a forum, data and information, best practices, and opportunities to coordinate offshore planning, regulatory, and siting activities to improve ocean and coastal ecosystem health, enhance decision making, and ensure compatibility among human activities.

Need for Action: There is an increasing need for data and information, multi-jurisdictional coordination, and effective stakeholder engagement as new activities continue to be proposed in state and federal waters.

Strategies: The OPC has identified five strategies for working toward its goal to support and coordinate ocean planning:

1. Provide a regional forum for a broad range of interests to engage in and coordinate across offshore planning and management issues
2. Identify and implement best practices for environmental review, permitting, and management of ocean uses

3. Engage stakeholders in the development of peer-reviewed geospatial data products characterizing human activities and ecological and cultural resources and their change over time
4. With partners, host and foster the Regional Wildlife Science Entity
5. Determine near and long-term capacity and funding needs to support OPC activities

Strategies and activities: Each of the strategies below are in the process of being implemented. Strategies are supported by individual activities that committee members and partners will implement.

Strategy OPC-1: Provide a regional forum for a broad range of interests to engage in and coordinate across offshore planning and management issues

OPC-1.1 Host OPC meetings

The OPC will hold regular meetings to identify priorities, ensure communication and coordination across agencies and jurisdictions, and to provide opportunities for public input.

OPC-1.2 Establish work groups or subcommittees to support regional ocean management and planning priorities

The OPC will establish work groups and subcommittees as needed to support ocean management and planning priorities that are identified through OPC meetings. Work groups and subcommittees will be composed of individuals with experience in the topic. Currently, there are work groups and subcommittees developing Best Practices (see Strategy 2), supporting data development for the Portal (see Strategy 3), and developing a research and monitoring agenda to better understand wildlife interactions with offshore wind development (see Strategy 4). In addition, there is an aquaculture work group that is sharing information and coordinating best practices for reviewing and permitting aquaculture in federal waters and an offshore transmission work group that has been coordinating information needs and linking the coastal permitting and planning community with energy and transmission professionals, including grid operators, to ensure mutual understanding of onshore grid and transmission issues with offshore permitting and planning issues.

OPC-1.3 Enable and initiate discussions, forums, and workshops for emerging or important regional ocean management and planning issues

The OPC will provide opportunities for interjurisdictional coordination, public awareness, and input on emerging or important regional ocean management issues. In addition to work groups and subcommittees that may include OPC members and public participants, the OPC will host workshops, webinars, and other forums to enable coordination and information sharing for emerging issues.

Strategy OPC-2: Identify and implement best practices for environmental review, permitting, and management of ocean uses

OPC-2.1 Finalize, Communicate, and Obtain Feedback on Best Practices

The OPC has established a Best Practices Work Group that drafted a set of *Best Practices for Ocean Permitting and Management Processes*. Best practices in this context are specific activities that can be implemented in ocean permitting and management processes that enhance one or more of the following four themes **(1) Stakeholder engagement, (2) Agency and interjurisdictional coordination, (3) the Use of data and information, and (4) Regulatory pre-application practices**. The OPC will obtain public input and finalize the Best Practices. Once final, the OPC will use NROC's regional forum to communicate to regulators, planners, and the public. In addition, the Best Practices will be shared with

other regions and the federal Ocean Policy Committee, which is co-chaired by the White House Council on Environmental Quality and the Office of Science and Technology Policy.

OPC-2.2 Develop Short Summaries of the Best Practices Being Used for Different Management Activities and Regulatory Processes

The OPC will develop and maintain short summaries of the Best Practices being implemented for different management activities, regulatory processes, and ocean issues. The intent of these summaries is to describe how the best practices have and can be implemented during specific regulatory or management processes. The first four topics will be offshore wind, aquaculture, cables and pipelines, and marine transportation and navigation. The OPC will consider developing summaries for additional ocean management and regulatory issues once the first four are completed. Summaries will be updated on a regular basis, shared publicly, and used to inform agency staff.

Strategy OPC-3: Engage stakeholders in the development of peer-reviewed geospatial data products characterizing human activities and ecological and cultural resources and their change over time

OPC-3.1 Develop, implement, and update the annual [Northeast Ocean Data Portal Work Plan](#)

The OPC will develop and implement an annual work plan detailing the activities necessary for engaging topical experts and the public in the development, review, and dissemination of maps and data products for regional ocean management priorities. The work plan will synthesize budgets, funding requirements, annual data priorities, outreach, and communications by describing activities for the following four overarching tasks.

1. Maintain and develop maps and data products for regional ocean management data priorities
2. Maintain and enhance applications and tools for visualizing and utilizing regional data products
3. Maintain website and IT infrastructure
4. Conduct outreach to identify data priorities, inform data product development, and enhance user understanding of the Portal

OPC-3.2 Establish work groups to guide the development of data products for specific topics

The OPC will establish and convene regional work groups to support and inform the development of specific data themes. The OPC has or is currently convening work groups for the following data themes: commercial fishing, energy and infrastructure, marine transportation, recreation, culture, marine mammals and sea turtles, fish, birds, seafloor habitat, eelgrass, and coastal vegetation and blue carbon. Existing and additional work groups will convene and meet on an as-needed basis to inform the development of new or updated data products within that theme.

OPC-3.3 Coordinate data work groups and data development with related NROC and partner activities

NROC recognizes that the Portal may be used by other NROC committees to disseminate maps and data or that there are data topics that are relevant to multiple committees. These provide opportunities for efficiency and coordination across NROC. Specifically, the data being developed by the marine life and habitat work groups are likely to be relevant to the Integrated Sentinel Monitoring Network being advanced by the Ocean and Coastal Ecosystem Health Committee (OCEHC). Similarly, the development of coastal vegetation, eelgrass, and blue carbon maps is also relevant to the OCEHC. In addition, NROC will coordinate map and data development with partners who conduct similar activities, such as the New England Fishery Management Council (NEFMC) and the Northeast Regional Association of Coastal Ocean Observing Systems (NERACOOS).

Strategy OPC-4: Host and foster the Regional Wildlife Science Entity (RWSE)

The RWSE is a multi-sector group that supports research and monitoring on wildlife and offshore wind on the US Atlantic coast. NROC, in collaboration with the Mid-Atlantic Regional Council on the Ocean and Coastal States Stewardship Foundation, provide staff (Director, Coordinator, Senior Advisor) and administrative functions (contracting and legal support). The four sectors that comprise RWSE (federal agencies, state agencies, eNGOs, offshore wind industry) overlap with regional ocean planning participants in the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic. Therefore, RWSE benefits from involvement of participants and staff in synergistic ocean planning activities described in other Strategies of this work plan.

The RWSE Work Plan outlines the broad bins of responsibilities shared between NROC, MARCO, and CSSF in launching and implementing the RWSE. There are six broad ongoing tasks. More specific actions that will be required within each of these tasks are projected each year. The following activities are inclusive of those tasks – see the RWSE work plan for additional details.

OPC 4.1 Support RWSE Administrative, Fundraising and Governance Functions

The OPC will provide support to RWSE’s administrative, fundraising and governance functions. This includes providing staff and contract support, developing and providing oversight for contracts, ensuring coordination with related NROC and partner activities, supporting fundraising for RWSE operations and research, and establishing and maintaining the [RWSE Governance Structure](#). RWSE governance includes three components – Steering Committee, Sector Caucuses, and taxa-based or issue-specific Subcommittees. The activities of the Subcommittees are synergistic with Portal work groups (OPC Strategy 3.2). RWSE Subcommittees are connected to existing NROC/MARCO Marine Life Work Groups such that they are distinct but complementary, with beneficial overlap in membership towards streamlining workflows such that research prioritization and data collection result in shared data products that support decision-making and adaptive management and vice-versa. RWSE Subcommittees and NROC/MARCO Marine Life Work Groups hold joint meetings when it is beneficial to advancing offshore wind monitoring/assessment topics. Staff provide support for regular meetings and the dissemination of information and draft work products for review throughout the RWSE Governance Structure.

OPC 4.2 Support RWSE Research Coordination

The OPC will provide support for RWSE’s research activities, including the development of research priorities and science/implementation plans for those priorities, cataloging and coordinating existing research projects, obtaining funding commitments for new research, and managing related research projects. Where possible, staff will use regional data portals to disseminate spatial data for planning research activities and displaying monitoring/research results. Work under this task will therefore be highly coordinated with Portal development and maintenance, as well as relevant OPC data work groups.

OPC 4.3 Support RWSE Communications, Outreach and Engagement

The OPC will support RWSE outreach and engagement as described in the RWSE work plan. This includes leveraging and efficiently using NROC member and staff time to engage RWSE stakeholders while conducting related activities from the OPC work plan. In addition, the RWSE will use the Portal, ocean planning website, and ocean planning email list, and other OPC communication tools to engage the public in RWSE activities.

Strategy OPC-5: Determine near and long-term capacity and funding needs to support OPC activities

OPC 5.1 Establish OPC membership and leadership

NROC will periodically confirm OPC membership and determine leadership from its members. States, federal agencies, federally recognized tribes, and the New England Fishery Management Council are welcome to join the OPC as members. The OPC will be led by state, federal and tribal co-chairs. In recent years, OPC leadership has evolved into a small committee with co-chairs. The OPC co-chairs and the leadership committee have oversight responsibilities for contract staff, budgets, contracting, proposals, OPC meetings, and work plan development.

OPC 5.2 Determine capacity and budget requirements and secure funding to support ocean planning activities, including the operations and maintenance of the Northeast Ocean Data Portal

OPC leadership and membership will determine budget and capacity requirements, identify potential funding sources, and secure funding and capacity to achieve work plan outcomes. This could include governmental and non-governmental funding sources, in-kind capacity from OPC members, and other partnerships and opportunities to leverage funding or obtain additional resources.