

Northeast Regional Ocean Council | Ocean Planning Committee

2024-2028 Workplan

NROC and Role of the Ocean Planning Committee

NROC is a Regional Ocean Partnership that was established in 2005 by the Governors of Connecticut, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Maine, and Vermont to coordinate around regional priorities and cross-jurisdictional ocean and coastal management issues. Federal agencies have engaged as equal partners with the states since the inception of NROC. In addition to its charter membership, NROC welcomes and includes voluntary participation from other federal and state agencies, Tribes, the New England Fishery Management Council, and other regional partners, including ocean industries, academia, and environmental organizations. NROC works to promote inclusive engagement that is critical to address complex coastal and ocean issues throughout the region.

Regional priorities for NROC include climate change, coastal hazards and resilient communities, ecosystem health and biodiversity, improving ocean data and science, and proactive coordination around ocean management and regulatory decisions. We address regional priorities through three committees: Ocean Planning, Coastal Hazards Resilience, and Ocean and Coastal Ecosystem Health.

NROC's Ocean Planning Committee

The Ocean Planning Committee (OPC) works to balance the development of new and emerging ocean uses such as offshore wind with the protection of existing maritime uses and critical habitats, species, and resources, through its leadership in marine spatial planning. The OPC facilitates regional coordination, stakeholder engagement, and information sharing for regulatory and management decisions, including those related to offshore renewable energy, electricity transmission and submarine cables, disposal sites, aquaculture, marine transportation, and habitat protection. NROC also maintains the [Northeast Ocean Data Portal](#), a source of ocean user-informed and expert-reviewed geospatial data products for coastal and ocean management and planning.

Below the OPC outlines actions to advance regional coordination of ocean and coastal management in New England for 2024-2028. *NROC will revisit this workplan every two years to update according to emerging issues.*

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 OPC Action: There is a regionally distinct and increasing need for data and information, multi-jurisdictional coordination, and effective ocean user, Tribal, and community engagement as current and future activities are proposed in state and federal waters.

OPC Priority Actions

Priority Action – 1 – OPC: Provide a regional forum to coordinate ocean and coastal planning and management that addresses: current uses, Tribal priorities, upcoming federal policy actions, and emerging uses.

Action 1.1 – Regularly Convene 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. Meetings will also address current

issues raised by NROC staff and OPC members related to ongoing planning for offshore wind, aquaculture, and other emerging planning issues that could be topics for OPC coordination, information sharing, data development, or consideration of best practices

Action 1.2 – Establish Workgroups or Subcommittees to Support Regional Ocean and Coastal Management and Planning Priorities

The OPC will establish workgroups and subcommittees as needed to support ocean management and planning priorities that are identified through OPC meetings. Workgroups and subcommittees will be composed of individuals with experience in the topic. Currently, there are work groups and subcommittees reviewing Best Practices (see Priority Action 2), supporting data development for the Portal (see Priority Action 3), advancing understanding of submerged archeological resources (see Priority Action 3), and advancing a research and monitoring Science Plan to better understand wildlife interactions with offshore wind development (see Priority Action 4). There have also been ongoing and recent activities around aquaculture and transmission that could be incorporated into future workgroups.

Action 1.3. – Initiate Discussions, Forums, and Workshops for Emerging or Important Regional Ocean and Coastal Management and Planning Issues

The OPC will provide opportunities for interjurisdictional coordination, stakeholder and ocean user discussion and engagement, and input on emerging or important regional ocean and coastal 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.

Action 1.4 – Support Ocean and Coastal Management Processes at the Request of NROC Members

Inform and support regional ocean management processes at the request of NROC membership. For example, support of the offshore wind planning process in the Gulf of Maine at the request of BOEM and the states.

Priority Action – 2 – OPC: Identify and Implement Best Practices for Review, Permitting, Management

Action 2.1 – Solicit Feedback from Workgroup and Finalize Best Practices

The OPC has established a Best Practices Workgroup 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 and coastal permitting and management processes that enhance one or more of the following four themes: **(1) Stakeholder engagement, (2) Agency and interjurisdictional coordination, (3) Use of data and information, and (4) Regulatory pre-application practices.** While draft, many of the best practices have been implemented such as posting on the Data Portal maps and data relevant to Federal Register notices, Army Corps of Engineers public notices, Coast Guard waterways management, and Bureau of Ocean Energy Management offshore wind planning. The OPC will solicit OPC committee and 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 as a potential model 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.

Action 2.2 – Communicate the Use of Best Practices in Management Activities and Regulatory Processes

The OPC will work to describe how the best practices have and can be implemented during specific regulatory or management processes. Descriptions of Best Practice use will be integrated into the Northeast Ocean Data Portal, discussed with stakeholders, and inform Priority Action 6.

Priority Action – 3 – OPC: Develop Ocean User and Peer-reviewed Geospatial Data Products Characterizing Human, Ecological, and Cultural Resources and Change Over Time

Action 3.1 – Develop and Implement an Annual Northeast Ocean Data Portal Work Plan

The OPC will develop and implement an annual work plan detailing the activities necessary for engaging ocean users, data experts, and the public in the development, review, and dissemination of maps and data products for regional ocean and coastal 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. Implementing these tasks will include coordination with other similar portal efforts including the Marine Cadastre and Mid-Atlantic Ocean Data Portal.

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

Action 3.2 – Establish Data Workgroups to Guide the Development of Data Products for Specific Topics

The OPC will establish and convene regional workgroups to support and inform the development of specific data themes including updates and maintenance schedules and how to depict changes over time in ocean uses and resources. Data workgroups will include experts from neighboring regions when appropriate. Outreach to ocean users and experts on data development and spatial products will occur for each data theme. The OPC is currently convening workgroups for the following data themes:

- marine life (marine mammals, sea turtles, fish)
- submerged archeological resources
- unexploded ordinances
- transmission related to offshore renewable energy
- commercial fishing updates
- seafloor habitat
- eelgrass, coastal vegetation and blue carbon

Existing and additional workgroups will convene and meet on an as-needed basis to inform the development of updated or new data products within themes including:

- energy and infrastructure
- marine transportation
- recreation
- culture

Action 3.3 – Develop specific portal applications to support ocean management and regulatory processes in New England, such as the Gulf of Maine Portal

Action 3.4 – Coordinate Data Workgroups and Data Development with related NROC and Partner Activities

NROC recognizes that the Portal may be used by other NROC committees and initiatives 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 relevant to the Regional Wildlife Science Collaborative for Offshore Wind (see Priority Action 4) and 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).

Priority Action 4 – OPC: Co-Host and Advance the Regional Wildlife Science Collaborative for Offshore Wind

The Regional Wildlife Science Collaborative for Offshore Wind (RWSC) was formed in 2021 by federal agencies, Atlantic coast states, conservation organizations, and offshore wind companies to coordinate with each other and the research community to advance research and monitoring of wildlife and offshore wind in US Atlantic waters. RWSC selected NROC and the Mid-Atlantic Regional Council on the Ocean (MARCO) to co-host the entity which includes fiscal sponsorship, assistance with staffing, fundraising, and strategies to effectively implement the [RWSC Annual Work Plan](#) and [Integrated Science Plan for Wildlife, Habitat, and Offshore Wind Energy in U.S. Atlantic Waters](#) (Science Plan) that reflects the research and data collection needs of the four sectors with input from the science community. The four sectors that comprise RWSC (federal agencies, state agencies, conservations organizations, offshore wind industry) as well as experts from the science community overlap with regional ocean planning participants in the Northeast. Therefore, RWSC benefits from involvement of participants and staff in synergistic ocean planning activities described in other Actions of this workplan.

See the RWSC Annual Workplan for additional details.

Action 4.1 – Support RWSC Administrative, Fundraising and Governance Functions

The OPC will provide support to RWSC’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 RWSC operations and research, and establishing and maintaining the RWSC Governance Structure. RWSC governance includes three components – Steering Committee, Sector Caucuses, and taxa-based or issue-specific Subcommittees. The activities of the Subcommittees are synergistic with several Portal workgroups (OPC Action 3.2). RWSC Subcommittees are connected to existing NROC Marine Life Workgroups 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. RWSC Subcommittees and NROC Marine Life Work Groups hold joint meetings when it is beneficial to advancing offshore wind monitoring/assessment topics. NROC staff provide support for regular meetings and the dissemination of information and draft work products for review throughout the RWSC Governance Structure.

Action 4.2 – Advance the RWSC Science Plan and Regional Research Coordination

The OPC will provide support for RWSC’s Science Plan, including the development of research priorities and science/implementation plans for those priorities, as well as work to catalog and coordinate existing research projects, obtain funding commitments for new research, and manage related research projects. Where possible, NROC staff will use the Northeast Regional Data Portal to disseminate spatial data for planning research activities and displaying monitoring/research results.

Work under this task will therefore be highly coordinated with Northeast Regional Data Portal development and maintenance, as well as relevant OPC data work groups.

Action 4.3 – Support RWSC Communications, Outreach and Engagement

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

Priority Action 5 – OPC: Define Near and Long-term Capacity and Funding Needs to Advance OPC Work

Action 5.1 – Work to Advance Bipartisan Infrastructure Law/Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act Projects

NROC staff in coordination with OPC co-chairs, subcommittees, and members will advance OPC BIL/IIJA projects throughout the region. Projects related to 2023-2024 are currently being advanced and NROC staff will be applying for additional projects to advance OPC work (2025-2027).

Action 5.2 – Establish OPC membership and leadership

NROC will confirm OPC membership every two years and determine leadership from its members. States, federal agencies, 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. The OPC co-chairs and the leadership committee have oversight responsibilities for contract staff, budgets, contracting, proposals, OPC meetings, and final workplan approval.

Action 5.3 – Secure Additional Resources 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.

Priority Action 6 – OPC: Review the Status and Use of the 2016 Northeast Ocean Plan as it Relates to Current Ocean Data Uses, Best Practices, and Ocean and Coastal Management Priorities and Needs

The OPC will evaluate the progress toward enhanced and improved governance originally framed in the Northeast Ocean Plan. The OPC will communicate the value of improved regional coordination with the development of a regional forum, dialogue, Northeast Ocean Data Portal, BIL/IIJA projects, and NROC committee and subcommittee work. The OPC will outline the value and continued need to engage in interjurisdictional coordination and engagement with stakeholders, communities, and other ocean users in the region.