



Hearing explores federal ocean plan

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PROVIDENCE, R.I. — The seas are getting crowded.

From recreational and commercial fishing, transportation and shipping to renewable energy generation, aquaculture and conservation, the world's oceans are quickly being inundated with competing uses.

Now the federal government is joining states such as Massachusetts and Rhode Island in developing a master plan for offshore waters.

A task force established in June by President Barack Obama to recommend a national policy for the country's oceans and Great Lakes met yesterday at the Rhode Island Convention Center in Providence to hear from New Englanders on the group's ambitious job.

The hearing was the third of six to be held across the country as the task force prepares its recommendations for the president.

Massachusetts officials are currently accepting comments on their own plan for state waters out to 3 miles off the coast.

A final version of the state's plan must be completed by Dec. 31 under the Oceans Act of 2008.

That effort, specifically the use of so-called marine spatial planning, was repeatedly pointed to by task force members as a possible example for the federal plan.

Marine spatial planning is a tool for analyzing different, and sometimes competing, uses in ocean waters to determine which areas are best suited for which activity and where certain activities should be banned. This ocean zoning technique has been used in Europe.

Although the task force has not progressed far enough to say whether federal waters will be mapped for different uses similar to what was done in a draft plan produced by Massachusetts officials, maps are an option, Nancy Sutley, chairwoman of the task force and the White House Council on Environmental Quality said before the public hearing.

Potential conflicts are evident in local waters off Cape Cod and the islands, where proposed tidal and wind energy projects, fishing and ferries are but a few of the activities that are ongoing or proposed for the area in and around Nantucket Sound.

The Woods Hole, Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket Steamship Authority alone makes 22,000 trips with 3 million passengers each year, Captain Charles Gifford, port captain for the ferry line, told task force members before a room of more than 150 people.

"Simply moving a vessel's track line farther east, west, north or south is not an option," Gifford said.

Ferry operations cannot be forced to change for fixed structures in the sound, he said, adding that wind farms are known to affect marine radar.

A final decision on the proposed Nantucket Sound wind farm is pending a review of the impact of the project on historic and tribal sites, Laura Davis, associate deputy secretary with the Department of Interior, said before the hearing.

The U.S. Minerals Management Service, a division of the Interior Department, is the lead agency to review the project.

A memorandum of understanding — one way the historic and tribal review process could end — was prepared for review at a meeting scheduled for next week, Davis said.

That meeting has been postponed, a spokeswoman for the Interior Department said last night.

The plan by Cape Wind Associates, LLC, to erect 130 wind turbines in the sound was proposed prior to the start of substantive ocean planning efforts at the state or federal government.

It has undergone a permitting process largely separate from the federal government's offshore renewable energy and ocean zoning initiatives.

It is important that the federal ocean policy take into account local and regional input, Cheryl Andrews—Maltais, chairwoman of the Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head (Aquinnah) told the panel.

"When a resource is shared, traditionally everyone who has a stake in it has a voice in how it is utilized," she said.

The federal government should make data it collects easily accessible and support regional groups already working on ocean policy, Deerin Babb-Brott, assistant secretary for Oceans and Coastal Zone Management for the Massachusetts Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs told the task force.

In addition to marine spatial planning, the task force's emphasis on an ecosystem-based management was commendable, said Don Anderson, a senior scientist at the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution.

But more funding for monitoring and observation was necessary, Anderson said.

"In effect, we need to instrument and model the ocean the same way we do with weather on land," he said.

The task force's work was a "big step in the right direction," Christopher Mann senior officer at the Pew Environment Group said prior to his own testimony before the task force.

Mann, who was the Ocean and Coastal Policy Director for the Pew Oceans Commission, one of two commissions whose work presaged the task force's work, said this is the first time the federal government has spoken with a unified voice about a national ocean policy.

But benefits from the national policy must be clear to local communities, he said. "If it ain't delivering benefits at the local level, it will die on the vine."

WEB LINKS

www.whitehouse.gov/administration/eop/ceq/initiatives/oceans/

To read and comment on the interim report by the federal Ocean Policy Task Force

www.unesco-ioc-marinesp.be/

For more information on marine spatial planning