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Obama launches ocean zoning plan

By **FRANK HARTZELL** Staff Writer -

Updated: 12/17/2009 07:57:21 AM PST

The Obama administration has launched a new "zoning" approach that puts all ocean activities under the umbrella of nine regional planning bodies.

Public comments are being accepted through Friday, Feb. 12.

The approach is more local and integrated than the current strategy, which puts separate functions under different federal agencies. But it remains to be seen how such a plan can satisfy a plethora of federal laws that now protect the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, the Gulf of Mexico and the Great Lakes.

The issue of whales killed by ships (like the blue whale kill in October off Fort Bragg) is cited in the new report as an example of how the regional planning approach could solve problems that single agencies cannot.

In the Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary off Boston, the Coast Guard, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and several other government agencies and stakeholders reconfigured the Boston Traffic Separation Scheme, after numerous fatal collisions between marine mammals and ships.

This kind of joint action is what the new Obama approach anticipates using nationwide.

The reconfigured shipping lanes reduced risk of

collision by an estimated 81 percent for all baleen whales and 58 percent for endangered right whales, studies show.

NOAA is the lone federal agency dealing with the whale kill issue locally, working with two state agencies, which have regulations that are inconsistent. With the Fort Bragg incident highlighting weaknesses in the regulatory process, a regional board could propose solutions.

In another example of oversight conflict, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) planned and launched a policy for wave energy leasing completely without local governments' knowledge. Other federal agencies also bombarded FERC with criticism and problems their federal fellow had failed to anticipate when FERC's program came to light.

The Obama administration's idea is to bring all the federal and local agencies to the table at the planning stage, not the reactive stage.

"The uses of our oceans, coasts and Great Lakes have expanded exponentially over time," said Nancy Sutley, chair of the White House Council on Environmental Quality, who also heads the Ocean Policy Task Force. "At the same time they are facing environmental challenges, including pollution and habitat destruction, that make them increasingly vulnerable.

"Without an improved, more thoughtful approach, we risk an increase in user conflicts and the potential loss of critical economic, ecosystem, social, and cultural benefits for present and future generations," said Sutley, in a press release.

Many scientific studies have called for ocean zoning, but this is the first effort to make the idea

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work.

California, Oregon and Washington would be included in a single planning area. The participants in the planning process, such as Indian tribes, federal agencies, states and local entities, would be asked to sign a contract modeled on development agreements.

Development agreements are widely used by housing developers to bring all county and state permitting agencies to the table so they can get loans and prepare to launch a project.

Sutley said the administration will reconvene the National Ocean Council to work with the regional planning bodies.

While the new approach promises more locally responsive planning, the job of the National Ocean Council will be to ensure that planning is consistent from region to region. That is likely to create some conflicts with monied interests representing some uses, such as oil drilling, and leave other uses with less ability to advocate at the table.

The proposal comes from the Interagency Ocean Policy Task Force, established by President Obama on June 12. It is led by Sutley and consists of 24 senior-level officials from administration agencies, departments and offices.

The task force's interim framework is available for a 60-day public review and comment period. After the close of the comment period, the task force will finalize its recommendations in both this report and the Sept. 10 interim report and provide a final report to the President in early 2010.

For more details on the Interagency Ocean Policy

Task Force, including the interim framework, and to submit comments, visit www.whitehouse.gov/oceans.

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