

Regional Ocean Governance Initiatives Across the U.S.: Considerations, Challenges, and Solutions

Introduction

The Northeast Regional Ocean Council (NROC) chaired a session at the Coastal Zone 2009 conference on July 21, 2009 to engage practitioners from across the country in a facilitated discussion on regional ocean governance successes, challenges, and lessons learned. The timeliness of this discussion was demonstrated by the level and diversity of participation, with more than 60 representatives from regional ocean councils (NROC, West Coast Governors Agreement (WCGA), Gulf of Mexico Alliance (GOMA), Mid-Atlantic Regional Council on the Ocean (MARCO), South Atlantic Alliance (SAA), and Gulf of Maine Council on the Marine Environment (GOMC)) and other regional partners.

While this summary report focuses on the challenges and strategies discussed in the session, participants devoted significant time to describing the value of regional ocean councils (ROCs) and their successes. ROCs are seen as a key mechanism for improved ocean management because of their focus on coordination and collaboration across state and federal agencies to advance responses to priority ocean and coastal issues.

Opportunities and Successes

- ✓ ROCs have facilitated regular communication between the states and federal agencies, leading to better alignment of priorities and resources.
 - Federal agencies use needs expressed by ROCs to inform annual planning; and
- ✓ ROCs have increased visibility of coastal and ocean issues.
 - States communicate regional management and research needs to congressional delegates;
 - Federal agencies communicate regional issues to federal leadership and the Subcommittee on Integrated Management of Ocean Resources (SIMOR); and
 - State and federal agencies engage NGO partners in developing regional approaches to address coastal and ocean issues.
- ✓ ROCs develop partnerships with existing organizations and programs to address regional priorities.
 - Partner with existing organizations, including IOOS Regional Associations and Sea Grant, to leverage resources.

Challenges and Strategies

Results of the facilitated break-out sessions are summarized below to provide state, federal, NGO, and regional partners with insights on common challenges and potential strategies to support and improve these governance initiatives and their role in addressing issues that require a regional solution.

Challenge: Insufficient data and data coordination were identified as a common challenge across regions. Participants expressed not only a lack of data needed for decision making at regional, state, and local levels, but also a lack of coordination among entities collecting data. Participants acknowledged that data gaps and limitations provided opportunities for initiating regional-scale coordination.

Strategy

Participants suggested several opportunities to build a strategy for increasing coordination of data needs and collection.

- ✓ Establish a regional data clearinghouse and points of contacts for mapping data
 - Participants suggested regions use regional data portals or atlases to facilitate data sharing and gap analysis
- ✓ Call for federal accountability for data coordination
 - Participants suggested that federal agencies use online tracking tools to communicate planned data collection efforts and location of completed acquisitions
- ✓ Request federal agencies communicate data collection plans and options for 'buying up' related data needs

Challenge: Disproportionate and overall weak investment from the federal government was identified as another resource challenge for regional governance initiatives. At the time of this session, one of four established regional ocean governance initiatives enjoys direct funding for regional priorities from the federal government. Participants expressed frustration with the lack of process to fairly request and receive similar funds.

Strategy

Participants suggested a need to level the playing field and provide equal access to operating funds across the regions. Options to accomplish this could include:

- ✓ National legislation committing federal resources to ROCs
- ✓ Development of a joint request for operating funds from all the existing ROCs
- ✓ Develop mechanism for approval of ROC action plans to qualify for operational funding support

Challenge: Lack of Capacity to staff and implement regional governance initiatives emerged as a common challenge across the US. Participants felt that they are unable to meet the demand for coordination and collaboration in the regions with existing resources and capacities. Participants identified dedicated staff time and financial resources as essential capacities needed to coordinate meetings, travel, and to make progress on priority actions.

Strategy

Participants recommended several ways to increase the capacity of partners to advance regional governance initiatives.

- ✓ Conduct an investment gap analysis detailing what current funding levels are achieving and the additional capacity new or increased resources would bring.
- ✓ Initiate assessment of revenue-generating options for ROCs.
 - Participants suggested several options for generating revenue for ROCs to include in the assessment: oil and gas leases, cap and trade, alternative ocean energy developments, and public-private partnerships with industry, such as insurance and tourism.
- ✓ Develop mechanism for pooling resources among federal, state, and NGO partners
- ✓ Hire a ROC coordinator for each region
- ✓ Re-align federal agency budgets to build capacity around priority issues in each region
- ✓ Create opportunities for sharing lessons learned between regions

Challenge: Sustained leadership and participation. Participants recognized sustained engagement and participation from state and federal leaders as critical to the continued progress and success of ocean governance initiatives. Consistent and high level political support for ocean governance initiatives varies among the regions.

Strategy

Representatives from regions with mature governance groups provided lessons learned on how to engage state leaders, which included:

- ✓ Assess individual state political interests to provide opportunities for states to champion actions on regional priorities
- ✓ Engage state leadership in joint priority and goal setting
- ✓ Request commitment from state and federal leadership for regional priorities
- ✓ Align action plans with political cycles

Challenge: Competition between states as well as other regional organizations poses a challenge to regional ocean governance initiatives. The traditions of competing for economic development, research funding, and other financial or social benefits is a common barrier to enabling true regional collaboration around sensitive issues, such as fisheries and ocean energy.

Strategy

Participants suggested several strategies to diffuse competition issues between states early in the game:

- ✓ Allow time to build relationships and partnerships within the region
- ✓ Early collaboration on less competitive issues, such as data acquisition and information sharing
- ✓ Highlight region-wide benefits and the greater good to balance individual interests

Challenge: Lack of a unified, compelling story hinders ability to increase support and ultimate success of regional ocean governance efforts. With these efforts at different stages of maturity, funding, political support, on-the-ground accomplishments, and visibility, there exists no well-articulated overarching message that demonstrates the common need for and benefits of ROC initiatives, therefore justifying additional support.

Strategy

Improve communication and coordination across regions to develop common language for articulating ROC priorities, measures of success and value of federal-state partnerships. Specifically:

- ✓ Develop an alliance of states and federal colleagues engaged in ROC initiatives who would communicate regularly and work together strategically to present a unified message to Congress, federal agencies, and constituents.
- ✓ Develop a communication strategy for ROCs that uses common terminology, a common method for measuring success, articulates clear priorities across regions, and records deliverables.
- ✓ Develop elevator speech messaging that explains value of ROCs to congressional or high level audience with little time.
- ✓ Work through national groups such as Joint Ocean Commission Initiative and Coastal States Organization to carry national message.
- ✓ Onus is on federal agencies to connect the dots across regional initiatives.

Conclusion

This session provided partners in regional ocean governance initiatives an opportunity to share lessons learned and to discuss their continued challenges to regional collaboration. While each region has unique barriers to interstate and interagency collaboration, it was clear that there are opportunities to advance collaboration by addressing shared challenges. Identify and adopting measures to implement these strategies will be the next step for ROC partners and supporters. Evidenced by the quantity and quality of discussion during this session, ROCs and their partners should consider future opportunities to share lessons learned.

Appendix A. List of Participants

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