

Ocean Policy Task Force holds East Coast hearing

By Steven Stycos

A storm is gathering over the ocean.

More than 200 people attended a recent public hearing in Providence on ocean policy. Almost all who testified praised the interim report of President Barack Obama's Interagency Ocean Policy Task Force, but their recommendations for regulation of the U.S. coastline varied widely:

- Dennis Duffy, vice president of Cape Wind Associates, developer of a wind energy project off Cape Cod, said streamlining regulations to help wind power projects win quicker approval should be a priority.

- Beth Gedney of the Passenger Vessel Association, a Cape Wind opponent, said that shipping routes "must not be arbitrarily moved for someone else's convenience."

- "We let our military, with reckless abandon, kill marine animals," said Greg Gerritt, Friends of the Moshassuck founder and Green Party activist.

- "The [fishing] industry has been bled to death by environmentalists," said Pt. Judith fisherman Tina Jackson.

- "It's like the Oklahoma [land] Rush," said Polly Bradley, co-founder of Safer Waters in Massachusetts. Differing interests, she explained, are claiming portions of the oceans, just like the white settlers carved up the former Indian territory in 1889.

In June, Obama created the task force of 24 top policy administrators from the U.S. Dept. of Interior, the U.S. Navy, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the U.S. Coast Guard and other federal agencies. In mid-September, the task force filed an interim report that calls for strengthened data collection, enhanced water quality and comprehensive ocean planning.

Those vague recommendations caused little controversy at the hearing. A final report, due in December, will recommend a "framework" to develop a national coastal and ocean plan. That report, predicts Nancy Sutley, chair of the White House Council on Environmental Quality, could recommend changes in federal law to require

federal use zoning for oceans.

Most at the hearing endorsed the idea of a federal ocean plan, but designation of some ocean areas for fishing, wind turbines or conservation will likely cause conflict.

Grover Fugate, executive director of R.I.'s Coastal Resources Management Council, sees the task force as a positive development.

"It's something we're going to need as we deal with climate change," he said during an interview, noting that the task force is also timely as Congress is about to debate climate change and energy legislation.

The recent hearing was the panel's only public hearing on the East Coast and it produced more than two hours of public comment that highlighted the ongoing controversies that an ocean plan must address.

But the interim report's most far-reaching recommendation is for an "ecosystem-based approach."

Martha's Vineyard selectman Warren Doty noted that such an approach was not in evidence at a recent meeting of the National Marine Fisheries Council. The regulatory group debated separate management policies for scallops, then yellow tail flounder, then herring and then red crab, Doty reported. Nevertheless, he praised the approach, as did Janet Coit, the

Nature Conservancy's R.I. state director, and other environmentalists.

The interim report's call for coordination between federal agencies also brought praise. Without reform, said Save The Bay Advocacy Director John Torgan, federal policy will be "tragically ineffective."

To illustrate how different federal agencies pursue conflicting policies, he and Conservation Law Foundation Vice President Tricia Jedele cited recent history on Mt. Hope Bay. To improve winter flounder habitat, the R.I. Attorney General and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency forced construction of cooling towers at the Brayton Point power plant. Shortly afterwards, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the U.S. Coast Guard took steps to encourage development of a liquid natural gas terminal in the bay, demonstrating, said Jedele, "A complete lack of consideration of the ecosystem."

Elizabeth Hernberg, managing director of Sprague Energy, did not discuss Mt. Hope Bay, but warned that any coastal plan should protect shipping lanes, especially those needed to transport home heating oil in Narragansett Bay.

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