

## Improving ocean management

By **Michelle Portman**/ Special To The Tab

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One of the most controversial projects of the decade in our region is the wind farm proposed for Nantucket Sound. This project has environmentalists, longtime Cape Cod property owners, politicians, energy experts and concerned citizens throughout the state and the entire country taking sides. Should private companies be given a license to profit from marketable commodities produced on seabed that is public domain? Should the impact to unspoiled ocean vistas outweigh the potential benefits from the production of renewable energy? And should the authority of the federal government trump that of landside states simply because a project barely lies across an arbitrary line of jurisdiction?

These questions have prompted the state's renewed interest in ocean management. Offshore use projects are becoming more common and varied. Recent technological advances are making new ocean uses possible. Also, many types of projects are becoming increasingly difficult or impossible to site on land. Available land is scarce while limitations as to what can be built where are increasing. For years there has been controversy around offshore oil production in other parts of the country, for example, in California and Florida. In Massachusetts, recent offshore proposals include not only wind projects but wave energy developments, liquefied natural gas pipelines, fiber optic cable lines and sand and gravel mining.

In an effort to develop proactive governance to replace what has traditionally been a "first come, first serve" approach, state administrators convened an Ocean Management Task Force in 2003. Charged with developing a new Ocean Management Plan, the Task Force met approximately 30 times over 10 months, held six public meetings and received more than 300 public comments.

So, what does the Task Force have to show for their efforts? A report called Waves of Change was produced and made available to the public in March 2004. It recommends strengthening state agencies to address environmental, planning and public trust issues in both state and federal waters, establishing an ecosystem-based protocol to improve management of offshore areas, and initiating ocean education and stewardship initiatives.

In the area of governance, the task force recommended strengthening the Ocean Sanctuaries Act and the Public Waterfront Act (also known as Chapter 91) two existing regulatory programs, currently of questionable effectiveness. Earlier this year, Governor Romney filed the Ocean Resources and Conservation Act that would allow the state to assert greater control over its ocean territories and would implement some of the Task Force recommendations aimed at more proactive governance.

As for management tools, the Task Force recommends convening a work group to address the designation of marine protected areas, increasing enforcement of existing environmental laws pertaining to the ocean and waterways, and developing inventories of the uses and resources of the state's marine waters. To manage potential impacts of new projects, the Task Force recommended developing methodologies and standards

for the analysis of visual, cultural and aesthetic impacts of projects proposed for state waters.

Some of the most interesting and far-sighted recommendations of the Task Force have to do with improving scientific understanding of our marine environment. These include establishing a marine and fishery scientists group to advise the state, developing an ocean monitoring and research plan, a seafloor mapping program and standards for review of data submitted by project proponents. The Task Force also recommends that the state commit to developing an ocean literacy and stewardship "ethic" among Massachusetts residents, outreach mechanisms and greater dissemination of marine data collected to the public at large.

Certainly, our knowledge of the ocean, marine ecosystems and resources are so lacking that these steps are necessary at a minimum. But, the question remains whether the work of Ocean Management Task Force will contribute to wise proactive conservation of sensitive public resources in the near future. We now know, in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the consequences of debating coastal issues ad nauseum, postponing conservation measures and neglecting what goes on in the less visible, submerged domains of our environment. Will the conclusions of ocean experts make significant contributions to wiser ocean use, lead to further unfunded mandates or get slogged down while in their infancy and buried in the mud flats long before the tide rises? This remains to be seen.

To read more on Massachusetts' Ocean Management Initiative see:  
<http://www.mass.gov/czm/oceanmanagement/index.htm>.

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