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Editorial: Stewardship of the sea

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Obama administration officials point to the Deepwater Horizon disaster as proof that the country needs the new comprehensive ocean policy it released last week, and the spill is certainly a dramatic example of the environment's fragility and the overlapping interests at work off our shores.

The BP spill has fouled beaches and wetlands, chased away tourists, closed fisheries and led to a blanket deepwater drilling moratorium -- impacts that hit many people and many different economic sectors. It is a good illustration of the need for a comprehensive approach to managing and protecting the nation's coasts, oceans and Great Lakes.

But for South Louisianians, the spill is only the latest example of how critical oceans and coasts are to our lives, and how poorly we've been served by the current, fragmented approach to taking care of these vital resources.

Louisiana has suffered decades of coastal wetlands loss, due to human activity as well as natural forces, a destructive trend that leaves us far more exposed to tropical storms and hurricanes. Residents here watch a vast dead zone form off Louisiana's shore every summer, but there's little effort to reduce the cause -- agricultural runoff from the Midwest. We've seen fisheries pushed to near collapse by overfishing. And we've seen new industries eager to rush in, with little thought to possible negative consequences -- liquefied natural gas ports are one example; open ocean fish farming is another.

This state should benefit from a more comprehensive and careful approach to stewardship of these valuable resources. The Interagency Ocean Policy Task Force that President Barack Obama appointed a year ago calls for oceans and coasts that are "healthy and resilient, safe and productive, and understood and treasured." That's certainly what coastal Louisiana residents want and need.

While half the country's population lives in coastal areas, everyone is affected by what happens in our nation's waters and coastlines. "America's coastal regions and waters support tens of millions of jobs and account for trillions of dollars of the national economy each year," said Nancy Sutley, chairwoman of Council for Environmental Quality and one of the co-chairs of the new National Ocean Council.

Louisiana has struggled to make our coastal wetlands loss a national priority, as it deserves to be. Recognition of the economic value of healthy, vibrant coasts helps bolster that cause. A strong national oceans policy that emphasizes maintaining and restoring

such ecosystems -- as this one does -- ought to help the state gain support and funding for critically needed restoration projects.

"Coastal wetlands shelter recreational and commercial fish species, provide critical habitat for migratory birds and mammals and serve as a natural filter to help keep our waters clean," the task force wrote in its executive summary.

Louisianians expect those words from the administration's task force to be backed up with action.

The new oceans policy does not call for an added layer of bureaucracy but rather seeks to coordinate the efforts of the many federal agencies that already oversee aspects of ocean and coastal activity. The National Ocean Council will include the secretaries of all Cabinet-level federal agencies and representatives of other federal environmental and economic agencies.

The policy doesn't recommend any new regulations or restrictions on the use of oceans, coastlines and the Great Lakes. But it does set out to build a new framework that will be used to make such decisions. The National Ocean Policy relies on an approach known as Coastal Marine Spatial Planning, a concept that has been described as a kind of national zoning system for water and coastal areas. It uses science and analyses of current and anticipated uses to identify areas most suited to different activities.

The policy calls for dividing the country into nine regions -- the Gulf of Mexico Region, for example, includes Alabama, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi and Texas. Each of those regions will have a planning body, including state, local and tribal authorities, that will create its own plan.

The task force, which did its work in a year, calls for quick action in implementing the new policy. It sets a 2015 deadline for each regional body to have its Coastal Management Spatial plan written, certified by the National Ocean Council and implemented. But the report that accompanies the policy says that it expects most of the regional panels to reach that point in three years rather than five.

For Louisiana, it's good to see the administration pushing for action. This state has a narrow window of time to begin projects to reverse coastal erosion. We've also seen how little can happen if there isn't a shared sense of urgency. Voluntary efforts to reduce nutrient pollution that cause the Gulf of Mexico dead zone have seen little progress -- states in the Mississippi River watershed have until 2013 to submit plans for shrinking the size of the area of low oxygen, but no government agency is enforcing that deadline.

"Americans want clean beaches, abundant seafood and wildlife, a robust economy and jobs and recreational opportunities from our oceans," Ms. Sutley said. Louisianians understand that all of those things are vital to our way of life. It's good to see a national policy that makes the future of our coasts and oceans an urgent priority.