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Barney Bishop: New oceans policy from Washington threatens Florida's core industries

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Certainly you've heard of the new White House plan to scrap our nation's existing oceans policy and replace it with one that gives the federal government sweeping new authority over their use. Certainly you've read by now the actual policy document itself, having fully familiarized yourself with the intricacies of "marine spatial planning" and the mechanics involved in putting such a regime into place.

Wait. You hadn't heard any of that? You're not alone. Unfortunately, at a time of unprecedented economic challenge, the oceans proposal being put forth right now in Washington is less concerned with engaging the American people than it is with quietly locking away resources that could be used to generate jobs, revenue, and opportunity for Floridians.

Currently, the management of our offshore resources is handled by the Interior Department, an agency whose core mission directs it to treat the ocean as a treasure to be accessed and enjoyed by all. Of course, the conception of our oceans as a "multi-use" environment has never sat well with the environmental lobby — which is why the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) was brought in to manage the plan.

NOAA may be a sub-agency of the Commerce Department, but make no mistake: its institutional concern has nothing to do with jobs. The oceans analysis it recently released was written in precisely that vein: 27 mentions of the importance of "ecosystem-based management," but not a single word in a 40-page document explaining how our people are supposed to manage under a system that explicitly targets some of the most prolific job creators in the state.

The plan calls for nothing less than the "zoning" of our ocean areas, treating vast expanses of submerged federal tracts as if they were blight on a city block. You want to get rid of an undesirable business down the street that's been making too much noise? Zone it off the map.

You want to make sure that no energy exploration is allowed? Do the same.

The collateral damage this policy stands to leave behind would extend far beyond the business of oil, natural gas and wind. Florida takes its angling seriously, and is among the top five states in commercial fishing.

Unfortunately, NOAA believes that fishing is “unsustainable,” and that America’s fishers are “exploiters.” Under a new oceans policy, NOAA would have all the tools it needs to take a huge bite out of Florida’s marine industries, interests like fishing, tourism and transportation responsible for generating thousands of jobs and billions of public dollars each and every year.

It shouldn’t surprise anyone that those who fish our waters tend to be their best stewards as well. But don’t tell any of that to the president’s ocean advisors. Where most of us see a great blue expanse large and diverse enough to accommodate us all, NOAA sees an unruly province of which it needs to take immediate control.

Whether it’s successful in doing any of that, though, will depend on the type and volume of response the plan receives from a public that’s been intentionally kept in the dark. And if you care about the future of our economy and the well-being of our greatest natural asset, you’ll do your best to spread this critical information far and wide.

Barney Bishop is the president & CEO of the Associated Industries of Florida (AIF). AIF, known as “The Voice of Florida Business” in the Sunshine State, aims to foster an economic climate in Florida conducive to the growth, development, and welfare of industry and business and the people of the state. To learn more, visit www.aif.com.