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NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE
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ENERGY GUARDIAN

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Guest Opinion: Ocean policy reaches far beyond the sea

By House Natural Resources Committee Chairman Doc Hastings
EnergyGuardian
January 20, 2012

If there’s one accomplishment President Obama can take credit for during his first term in office, it’s expanding the size and reach of the federal government. While this may be good for government bureaucrats, the policies and regulations imposed by the Obama Administration are hurting American businesses and impeding economic recovery. Instead of focusing on creating new jobs, the administration has instead allowed the federal government to insert itself in places it’s never been and doesn’t belong.

One prime example of this, which has largely flown under the radar, is the President’s new plan to zone and regulate our oceans. Done unilaterally through Executive Order, the President’s National Ocean Policy will change how all federal agencies regulate activities impacting the ocean and Great Lake ecosystems. Without clear statutory authority, it sets up a new level of top-down federal bureaucracy with authority over the way inland, ocean and coastal activities are managed.

This has the potential to inflict damage across a spectrum of sectors including agriculture, fishing, construction, manufacturing, mining, oil and natural gas, renewable energy, and marine commerce, among others. These industries currently support tens of millions of jobs and contribute trillions of dollars to the U.S. economy.

Particularly worrisome is the mandatory Coastal and Marine Spatial Planning initiative, otherwise known as ocean and coastal zoning. This initiative could place huge portions of our oceans off limits to all types of recreational and commercial activities as well as restrict on-land activities, resulting in the loss of millions, if not billions, of dollars in economic

activity.

This additional layer of federal regulation will also create uncertainty for employers, deterring them from investing in new ventures or creating jobs. The Coastal and Marine Spatial Planning initiative involves vague and undefined objectives, goals, and policies that will be used to stop federally permitted activities and undoubtedly result in new litigation, further hindering economic growth.

While the Administration claims that this process will involve local participation, there is no doubt that this is a top-down plan being imposed by federal bureaucrats. In order to implement ocean zoning, the national ocean policy calls for the creation of nine federally appointed Regional Planning Bodies tasked with creating regional zoning plans.

These regulatory entities will create zoning plans for each region based on guidelines created in Washington, D.C. All federal agencies, states, and regulated communities will be bound by the plan. Even if a state chooses to opt out of participation in a Regional Planning Body, all federal agencies will use the new plan when making decisions on permitting activities within that state.

This plan is not limited to just our oceans and its reach will stretch far inland. The Regional Planning Bodies will have broad authority to issue regulations potentially impacting all activities that occur on lands adjacent to rivers, tributaries or watersheds that eventually drain into the ocean. For example, the Gulf of Mexico Regional Planning Body will make decisions that will require federal agencies to regulate activities throughout the entire Mississippi watershed if those activities have the potential to affect the health of the Gulf of Mexico.

A clean, healthy environment is a priority for all Americans. But we can protect our oceans while still maintaining their multiple-use. The Obama Administration should abandon this and other burdensome, far-reaching policies and regulations that will only lead to further job loss and economic damage.

(Rep. Doc Hastings, R-Wash., is the chairman of the House Natural Resources Committee).

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