

Blue Economy & Regional Partnerships Briefing Book



NCEL

National Caucus of
Environmental Legislators



Blue Economy & Regional Partnerships Briefing Book

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Introduction

As coastal states face increasing pressure from climate change, rapid coastal development, gentrification on waterfronts, and shifting global markets, **the Blue Economy** presents a timely opportunity to drive sustainable economic development while preserving critical marine and coastal ecosystems.

This Briefing Book provides an overview of the Blue Economy, policy options for state lawmakers, and strategies being used in three key regions to boost collaboration and outcomes: New England, the Gulf Coast, and the West Coast. The Briefing Book also offers considerations for how state policymakers can not only support this growing sector and our working waterfronts, but also how states can collaborate through regional partnerships, multilevel governance, and innovative financing.





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What is the Blue Economy?

Overview

At its core, the [Blue Economy](#) refers to the “business sectors that rely on the sustainable use of ocean resources for economic health, improved livelihoods, jobs, or ecosystem health.” It encompasses a wide range of economic activities that depend on the ocean and coastal resources, including traditional sectors such as commercial fishing and maritime transport, as well as emerging industries like offshore wind, aquaculture, and marine biotechnology.

Benefits for the Environment and Economies

What distinguishes the Blue Economy is its emphasis on [sustainability](#) — supporting economic growth while protecting the long-term health of ocean and coastal ecosystems. The Blue Economy already contributes [billions of dollars](#) annually to the national GDP and supports [millions of jobs](#), particularly in coastal communities. For many states, investing in ocean and coastal industries is a key part of building resilient local economies, attracting private investment, [preserving maritime heritage](#), and preparing for the impacts of sea-level rise and extreme weather.

Recognizing both the economic potential and the challenges ahead, a growing number of states are taking proactive steps to [promote and protect](#) their Blue Economies. These efforts include statewide ocean and coastal strategies, funding for resilient infrastructure, support for workforce development, and incentives for sustainable innovation.

Working Waterfronts



[Working waterfronts](#) are a vital part of a sustainable blue economy. These are the physical spaces that support water-dependent industries: ports, shipyards, seafood processing facilities, ferry terminals, and public and private access points. They are not only essential for the functioning of Blue Economy sectors but also face increasing threats from coastal development, environmental degradation, and rising property values.



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Defining the Blue Economy

Overview

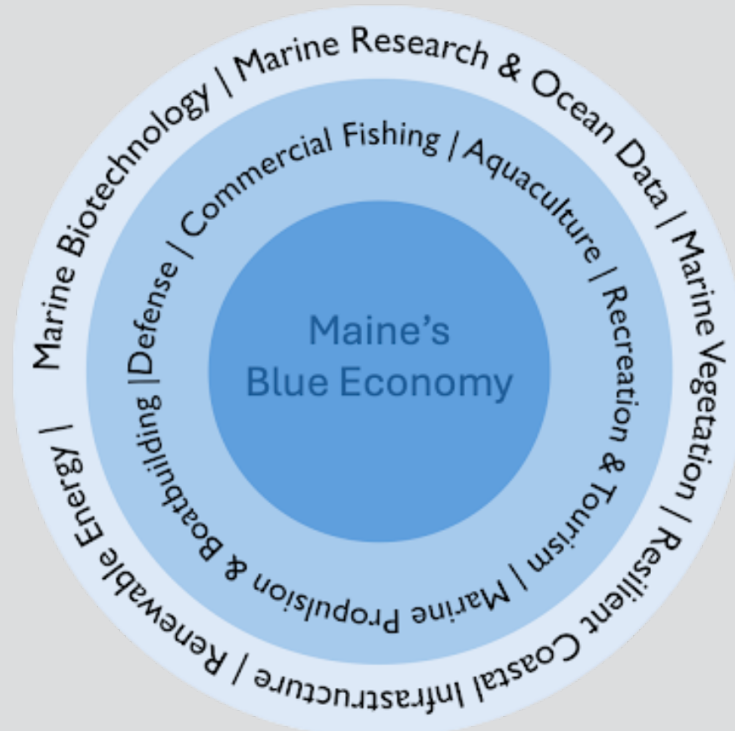
While there is a [federal definition](#) of the Blue Economy, many states have their own definitions. Two states — Maine and Florida — have defined the Blue Economy in state statutes. Maine’s blue economy definition was determined after convening stakeholders together following the legislature’s establishment of a [Blue Economy Task Force](#).

To maximize effectiveness, states can consider establishing Blue Economy task forces or offices that include and engage members across sectors, from aquaculture and commercial fishermen to educational institutions and offshore wind developers. Together, these members can help identify what the blue economy looks like in their respective states and states that share a common region of water (i.e., the Gulf of Maine, Chesapeake Bay, the Great Lakes, etc.).

States That Have “Blue Economy” Defined in Statute

State	Legal Definition of “Blue Economy”?	Key Features
Florida	Yes (Statute § 288.93)	Detailed legal definition; supports the Office of the Blue Economy.
Maine	Yes (Statute S.P. 523 – LD 1286)	The Blue Economy is defined as economic activity that sustainably uses ocean and coastal resources to improve livelihoods, create jobs, and enhance ecosystem health.
Massachusetts	Partial — Policy Focus	Programs and grants targeting Blue Economy sectors; no single statutory definition.
Other States	No statutory usage found	Some states have policy documents or plans (e.g., the California Ocean Protection Council), but no laws explicitly define the term.

Focus Point: Maine's Blue Economy Task Force



Inner circle = Traditional/evolving blue economy industries for Maine

Outer circle = Emerging/developing blue economy industries for Maine

Maine's Blue Economy Task Force

[Maine's Blue Economy Task Force](#) identified the various industries that comprise Maine's blue economy, categorizing them into traditional and evolving industries, as well as emerging and developing industries. In Maine, this can range from emerging industries in [marine biotechnology](#) to traditional marine heritage industries, such as commercial fishing and [defense](#), showcasing the [diversity](#) of local ocean-based economies. Introducing legislation to define one's state's Blue Economy by establishing a task force that convenes stakeholders can help states identify existing industries and possible new industries.

Photo: Graphic showcases the diversity and intersections of the many industries within the blue economy (courtesy of Maine Blue Economy Task Force). Source: <https://www.maine.gov/decd/business-development/blue-economy>.

Blue Economy Policy Options

Below are actionable strategies state legislators can take to strengthen their Blue Economies by aligning economic growth with sustainability across coastal and ocean-based industries.



Establish State-Level Blue Economy Task Forces that convene diverse stakeholders, including but not limited to fisheries, aquaculture, offshore wind developers, ports, and universities. Establishing a task force will help states define priorities and guide investment strategies.



Build on and Develop New Regional Collaboration Mechanisms, such as joint financing pools, shared research between state universities and ocean clusters, and multistate governance compacts to align investments and policies across shared waters.



Invest in Resilient Working Waterfront Infrastructure by leveraging state policy and building regional blue finance networks between states with shared bodies of water. Protecting working waterfronts — in the face of climate disasters and rising coastal property pressures — is valuable in supporting a growing blue economy.



Support Workforce Development and Innovation Hubs that connect universities, industry, and local communities to build the talent pipelines and technology needed to sustain and grow the Blue Economy.





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Case Study: New England

Overview

New England states are actively building sustainable blue economies by leveraging their rich maritime history, coastal resources, and [innovation hubs](#). States are investing in marine industries such as offshore wind, aquaculture, and coastal resilience while protecting traditional sectors like fisheries and working waterfronts. These efforts aim to balance economic growth with environmental stewardship in the face of climate change and rising sea levels.

Massachusetts

Massachusetts has enacted the [Oceans Act](#) (2008) and introduced a [Blue Communities](#) bill ([S.600/H.931](#)) to support coastal towns in adopting ocean-friendly practices. It is also investing heavily in offshore wind infrastructure, with port upgrades and workforce development centered in [New Bedford](#). The state, through its [Seaport Economic Council](#), has allocated [grants and helped with co-financing](#) for working waterfronts, port facilities, and aquaculture innovation hubs. This is a form of blue finance that could be replicated in other states.

Rhode Island

Rhode Island's Ocean Spatial Area Master Plan ([SAMP](#)) serves as a national model for marine spatial planning and guided the development of the country's first offshore wind farm at Block Island. The state continues to support ocean economy growth through [infrastructure investments](#) and [academic partnerships](#). Rhode Island's [Infrastructure Bank](#) can also be used as a way for the state to increase opportunities for blue finance. In the town of Warren, the bank has provided a [\\$20 million loan](#) to upgrade a wastewater treatment facility to ensure nearby Narragansett Bay remains clean.

Maine

Maine is focused on protecting access to the [working waterfront](#) ([L.D. 1245](#), [L.D. 574](#)), [expanding aquaculture](#) ([L.D. 1595](#), [L.D. 1722](#)), and researching floating offshore wind in the Gulf of Maine. It supports seafood processors, kelp and shellfish farmers, and marine science institutions that help build a climate-adaptive coastal economy. The Maine Legislature also passed [L.D. 1286](#) in 2023, which established a Blue Economy Task Force. The task force produced a report that looks at opportunities for growth and the current landscape, with a key recommendation that the state establish a [Center for the Blue Economy](#).

Connecticut & New Hampshire

[Connecticut](#) and [New Hampshire](#) are investing in port redevelopment, maritime education, and marine research, particularly through partnerships with universities and offshore wind developers. The University of New Hampshire's Center for Ocean Renewable Energy has conducted studies on wind turbines with [international partners](#), such as the Wind Energy Systems Research group at ForWind.

Policy Examples

- **Massachusetts [S.600/H.931](#) (Introduced, 2025):** Establishes a Blue Communities Program to incentivize local action to reduce nutrient pollution and ocean acidification. The program provides technical and financial assistance to municipalities and other local governments that adopt initiatives, including a shell collection system for local businesses, as well as shellfish and seaweed regenerative farming operations or restoration practices.
- **Maine [S.P.523/L.D. 1286](#) (Enacted, 2023):** Directs the Department of Economic and Community Development to convene a Blue Economy Task Force. The Task Force consists of representatives from various blue economy sectors, federally recognized Indian Tribes, fisheries, businesses, aquaculture, legislators, and public and private institutions. [A bill was enacted in 2025](#) to continue convening the task force.
- **Rhode Island:** In 2004, the Rhode Island General Assembly passed the Renewable Energy Standard ([R.I.G.L. 39-26-1](#)), which mandated that the state meet 16% of its renewable energy goals by 2019. After determining that an investment in offshore wind would be essential to reaching these goals, the state's Coastal Resource Management Council developed the [SAMP](#). The Plan serves as a regulatory, planning, and adaptive management tool to guide the Council's stewardship of coastal resources in state waters, covering topics pertaining to offshore energy, marine-based economic development, and more.

Opportunities for Collaboration in New England

Regional Collaboration

New England states collaborate through entities like the [Northeast Regional Ocean Council](#) (NROC) and the [Northeast Sea Grant Consortium](#), which support integrated ocean planning, aquaculture best practices, and data sharing. These regional partnerships can provide a roadmap for future collaboration between New England states, especially by pooling resources to invest in blue economy industries and protecting working waterfronts. New England can establish regional funds to help states ensure existing working waterfront infrastructure is resilient in the face of increasingly powerful storms, along with creating pools of investment for building out or developing new working waterfronts.

Academic Partnerships

Public and private universities across New England, in collaboration with the [Northeast Sea Grant Consortium](#) and ocean clusters, can also help provide technical expertise, such as mapping of working waterfronts and researching how best to invest regional funds into developing a regional Blue Economy.



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Case Study: Gulf Coast

Overview

The Gulf States — Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida — share a deeply interconnected economic and ecological system in the Gulf of Mexico. While each state maintains its own priorities in sectors such as energy, shipping, fisheries, and tourism, collaboration has become essential for addressing cross-border challenges and advancing opportunities within the Blue Economy.

Policy Examples

- **Florida [H.R.1285](#) (Enacted, 2024):** Creates the Office of Ocean Economy within the State University System to develop and expand blue economy resources, encourage research and collaboration among ocean users, and develop strategies to ensure ocean and coastal resilience.
- **Louisiana [H.B. 225](#) (Enacted, 2023):** Establishes a \$1 tax credit per 50 pounds of recycled oyster shells for participating restaurants. A state nonprofit — the Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana — recycles the shells and uses them for coastal erosion and oyster habitat restoration efforts.

Examples of Regional Collaboration in the Gulf Coast

The Gulf of America Alliance and the Gulf Fishery Management Council

One of the central vehicles for regional cooperation is the [Gulf of America Alliance](#), a state-led partnership that brings together all five states alongside federal agencies, universities, and nonprofits. The Alliance [coordinates on issues](#) such as coastal resilience, water quality, habitat restoration, fisheries management, and tourism promotion, ensuring that scientific data and policy approaches are aligned across jurisdictions. Similarly, fisheries are managed collaboratively through the [Gulf Fishery Management Council](#), which works to ensure the long-term sustainability of shared resources such as shrimp, red snapper, and reef fish.

Commerce and Infrastructure

The states are also working together in areas of [commerce](#) and [infrastructure](#). Gulf ports [cooperate through associations](#) on issues such as dredging, regulatory standards, and hurricane preparedness. Meanwhile, [emerging energy opportunities](#), including offshore wind leasing in Texas and Louisiana, are prompting new conversations about the Gulf's role in the [clean energy transition](#) and associated workforce development.

Looking Ahead

The Gulf States have a lot of different avenues to continue to align investments and policies. They can harness their shared waters and resources to drive sustainable economic growth while protecting the communities and ecosystems that define the region.



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Case Study: West Coast

Overview

California, Oregon, and Washington currently collaborate through regional frameworks such as the [West Coast Ocean Alliance](#) and the [Pacific Coast Collaborative](#). These state partnerships are key for coordinating responses to ocean acidification, marine debris, and climate change. They also share as a way to advance shared priorities like offshore wind development with the [Pacific Offshore Wind Consortium](#), and through [maritime decarbonization](#). Joint efforts reduce regulatory duplication, build unified supply chains, and strengthen workforce pipelines across state lines.

California

While California has had recent setbacks with offshore wind projects in Humboldt and Morro Bay, the state is utilizing its strengths in research and technology sectors to promote marine innovation hubs, like [AltaSea](#) at the port of Los Angeles or the port of San Diego's [Blue Economy Incubator](#). California also has the ability to provide for blue financing of projects through its [Climate Catalyst Fund](#).

Oregon

Oregon has become a center for marine renewable energy research, highlighted by the [PacWave](#) wave energy test site near Newport. In addition to fisheries and tourism, the state integrates academic research and workforce development with coastal industries, creating pathways for innovation and local economic benefits.

Washington

Washington, like Oregon and California, is also a growing [hub for marine technology](#). In the Seattle–Puget Sound region, there is a hub for [marine technology firms](#) and [research institutions](#) focused on ecosystem restoration and innovative shipping solutions.

Policy Examples

- **California S.B. 105 (Enacted, 2025):** Appropriates funds to the State Energy Resources Conservation and Development Commission to report on how the Commission plans to maximize funds to attract private and federal funding needed to complete port infrastructure investments to meet offshore wind goals.
- **Oregon H.B. 3786 (Introduced, 2025):** Provides funding to the Ocean Science Fund to host competitive ocean and coastal science and monitoring grants. Specific scientific research would include: risks and vulnerabilities that threaten the state's economy and marine ecosystems, methods to address coastal erosion, and more.

- **Washington [S.B. 5519](#) (Introduced, 2025):** Establishes new regulations for ocean-going vessels to reduce environmental impacts from fuel combustion in state waters. Vessels that cannot comply with the fuel requirements may be eligible to pay noncompliance fees, which will be directed to ports for electrification or emission reduction activities.

Opportunities for Collaboration on the West Coast

With the West Coast having the public and private infrastructure in place to promote the growth of marine technology, this also presents opportunities for these states to collaborate and pool resources to grow blue technology regionally in the face of federal funding uncertainties and international challenges like [retaliatory tariffs](#).

With the cancellation of federal funding for offshore wind projects on the West Coast, like [Humboldt Bay](#), there are opportunities for these states to use existing partnerships to find ways to invest in offshore wind. To this end, the California legislature has approved [\\$227.5 million in funding \(SB 105\)](#) for ports that will support floating offshore wind projects.

Conclusion

The Blue Economy represents an opportunity for coastal states to protect existing maritime heritage industries, promote healthy coastal ecosystems, and unlock untapped economic opportunity. As the examples across New England, the Gulf Coast, and the West Coast show, states are already demonstrating innovative approaches to growing their blue economies, from supporting a growing aquaculture sector and offshore wind development to blue finance tools and working waterfront protections.

The full potential of the Blue Economy will only be realized through deliberate, regionally coordinated action that balances economic opportunity with coastal ecosystem resilience. States that act now to develop their own definitions of the blue economy into law, strengthen regional collaboration, and invest in resilient working waterfront infrastructure will be better positioned to attract private capital, safeguard coastal communities, promote sustainable growth, and ensure long-term prosperity in the face of climate change.

Learn More

To learn more about growing a sustainable Blue Economy in your region, visit NCEL's [Blue Economy webpage](#) or contact NCEL's Ocean Program Manager [Alissa Weinman](#).



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Notes



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