MISSION FOR AMERICA · CHAPTER 21 · AT A GLANCE

The National Mission to Save Earth’s Oceans

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Millions of tons of plastic enter the world's oceans every year, and lost fishing gear makes up as much as 70 percent of the large debris floating in them. The Gulf of Mexico dead zone, fed by fertilizer running off Midwestern farms, covered 6,705 square miles in 2024. Coral reefs from Florida to Hawaii are bleaching, the oyster reefs, seagrass, and mangroves that shelter fish and buffer storms are disappearing, and more acidic water is killing young shellfish. Nearly half of American waters have never been mapped to modern standards, and the agencies that manage them are losing staff and freezing grants. The Mission for Oceans will make the U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone, the waters within 200 nautical miles of every American coast, the healthiest, best-monitored, and most economically productive large marine area on Earth within 10 years.

This mission will:

- Clean the sea by removing 90% of the large floating plastic in U.S. waters each year and retrieving all newly lost fishing gear. A per-ton fee on new plastic will pay for the cleanup contracts and robotic skimmers, and a domestic advanced recycling industry will turn the recovered plastic back into raw material for manufacturers.
- Rebuild the oyster reefs, kelp forests, salt marshes, seagrass, and mangroves along the coast, with a fund that adds two federal dollars to every dollar a state, tribe, or foundation puts in. Farmers upstream will be paid to cut the runoff that causes the Gulf dead zone, and shellfish growers will get early warning and equipment to protect their hatcheries from acidifying water.
- Map the entire EEZ and protect 30% of it as fully protected Marine Protected Areas, linked by corridors along the routes whales, turtles, and tuna travel. Offshore wind will be sited using the map, away from sensitive habitat.
- Halt commercial deep-sea mining in U.S. waters until independent science shows whether it can be done without lasting harm.
- Rebuild the fisheries by funding the science behind catch limits, ending overfishing, setting a deadline to rebuild every depleted stock, and paying fishers affected by the changes through voluntary buyouts and income support.

Most of the work will run through the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, which will make 30-year, low-interest loans to recycling plants, restoration operators, kelp farms, and aquaculture, and will pay companies to build the cleanup and mapping fleets only when they deliver results. The public will pay directly for the work that earns no revenue, including the survey of the EEZ, enforcement of the protected areas, and the science behind catch limits. Anyone who damages habitat in federal waters, from offshore wind foundations to dredging, will have to pay to restore an equal area elsewhere, the same rule that has protected wetlands on land for 50 years.

The mission will cost on the order of tens of billions of dollars a year, and most of it will be repaid by the industries it finances. It will create tens of thousands of jobs in coastal communities, and by the end of the decade American fishing will land more fish, from healthier stocks, than it does today.