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January 22, 2024

The Honorable Ron DeSantis
Governor of Florida
Members of the Florida Legislature
Tallahassee, FL 32399

Dear Governor DeSantis and Members of the Florida Legislature:

The Florida Ocean Alliance is pleased to provide our 2024 Policy Priorities for your consideration. These include 1) Strengthening Coastal Resilience and Improving Water and Habitat Quality, 2) Ensuring Community Hazard Preparedness, 3) Promoting Economic Growth of Florida's Blue Economy, and 4) Implementing recommendations from the Strategic Plan for Florida's Ocean and Coastal Future. These priorities are based on the Alliance's [2020 Strategic Plan for Florida's Oceans and Coasts](#) that was funded by the Florida Legislature.

As a state known for its outstanding and invaluable marine and coastal resources, strengthening coastal resilience is critical to Florida's future. Florida policymakers must address the challenges of climate change on our coasts and communities—from increasingly powerful hurricanes to warming oceans that are damaging coral reefs, and sea level rise that is causing more frequent, extreme flood events. Florida's economic future relies on a vibrant and sustainable Blue Economy for economic resilience and stability, and that Blue Economy depends on healthy oceans and resilient coasts and communities.

The Florida Ocean Alliance represents a diverse nonpartisan partnership of leaders dedicated to advancing Florida's responsible ocean and coastal economic development, conservation, education, and technology innovation. Our Board of Directors represents key industry sectors—ports, cruise lines, marine industries, and technologies—which comprise the Blue Economy, as well as nonprofit environmental organizations, academia, the ocean research community, and public interest groups.

We share the Legislature's interest in supporting a bright economic future for our state and recognize the key contributions of a healthy Blue Economy. Please consider the Florida Ocean Alliance and its Board of Directors as a valuable resource and a willing partner to assist you in planning for and building a sustainable future for Florida's vital Blue Economy.

Sincerely,

Glenn Wiltshire, President
Florida Ocean Alliance

2024 PRIORITIES FOR A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE FOR FLORIDA'S OCEANS AND COASTS



Pursue ocean and coastal economic opportunities, promote conservation, accelerate scientific research and innovative technology to ensure a sustainable future for the state and build Florida's national and global leadership in the Blue Economy.

Florida is at a crossroads facing myriad issues related to climate change that threaten the state's residents and businesses, as well as its environment. This threat is especially felt by businesses representing the ocean economy, known as the "Blue Economy." Heavier rains and tidal flooding are now a regular occurrence across the state. Stronger hurricanes are causing more damage, resulting in higher and prohibitive insurance rates for residents and businesses. Marine industries that constitute the ocean economy are impacted substantially by all these events. The state faces a perilous future. Only with increased planning, innovation, application of new technologies, and funding will Florida residents and businesses succeed in meeting these challenges.

Florida now has a historic opportunity to proactively protect and restore its valuable ocean and coastal resources and thus take full advantage of the economic opportunities and innovation they provide. **Florida Ocean Alliance's Priority Recommendations** support the ocean and coastal priorities of the Governor, the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. The Alliance recommendations focus on four key areas:

1. **Strengthening Coastal Resilience, Improving Water and Habitat Quality**
2. **Ensuring Community Hazard Preparedness**
3. **Promoting Economic Growth of Florida's Blue Economy**
4. **Implementing the Strategic Plan for Florida's Ocean and Coastal Future** *(Prepared by Florida Ocean Alliance)*

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1. Strengthening Coastal Resilience, Improving Water and Habitat Quality

Florida's geography makes it uniquely vulnerable to the effects of climate change, particularly from flooding in coastal areas. That vulnerability threatens a substantial portion of Florida's economic dependence on coastal and ocean resources, as well as the large amount of real estate located in high flood risk areas. At the same time, Florida has extensive natural assets, such as reefs and coastal marshes and wetlands, which could serve to reduce the possible damages from coastal storms and flooding. Cost-effective options to reduce damage to Florida's coasts include protection, restoration, expansion, and management of healthy natural habitats (e.g., mangroves, oyster and coral reefs, and dunes).

Florida's population growth continues to surge, reaching 22.6 million people in 2023, with an increase of more than 365,000 residents and the second highest growth rate in the nation. Florida must now address all the issues raised by that rapid growth. The state's expected growth is projected at almost 300,000 new residents per year over the next five years, or 800 per day. This growth will result in more development, associated changes in land use and increased wastes, and increasing pressure on Florida's ocean and coastal resources. We commend the Governor's Executive Order 23-06 for providing important funding for water quality projects in both the Everglades and key estuaries like the Indian River Lagoon.



Photo: St. Andrew Bay system, St. Andrew and St. Joseph Bays Estuary Program

In addition to the local threats, global climate change, including sea level rise and more extreme weather, intensify impacts on Florida's fragile resources and threaten the health and well-being of communities. Moreover, recent events presage global changes in the frequency and intensity of extreme weather, the latest being Hurricane Idalia in 2023. Increases in billion-dollar disasters accompany these weather events, along with losses in the state's natural infrastructure.

2. Ensuring Community Hazard Preparedness

As Hurricane Idalia proved in August of 2023, dangerous hurricanes are not limited to Florida's coastal areas. The Governor declared a state of emergency for 49 Florida counties as Idalia approached, insuring assistance for anticipated flooding, rainfall, storm surge, and tornadoes. While Idalia's storm surge of over four feet hit the populous Tampa Bay area, the hurricane also pounded the state's inland areas as it cut across the Big Bend region and inland areas of northern Florida where hurricanes are less common. In 2023, the extreme conditions, including warmer ocean waters and El Nino's strong wind shear, may be a forecast of what the future holds.



Photo: Hurricane Ian, NASA Earth Observatory

Communities and businesses along Florida's coasts are also at risk from other costly and destructive hazards, including coastal erosion and those associated with sea level rise, such as increased storm surge, saltwater intrusion, and weakened infrastructure. Coastal communities need tools, approaches, and technologies to assess their level of risk from these contemporary and future threats. They also need effective strategies to reduce risk, respond to impacts and improve recovery efforts to minimize the losses to coastal properties and businesses. The Governor's actions implementing local vulnerability assessments are critical in addressing local flood risks and community preparedness. This is a pre-eminent issue for the state, given that nearly 80% of the state's gross domestic product is at risk and associated with low-lying coastal counties where over three-quarters of Florida

residents live. This issue is a focus of Governor DeSantis' Executive Order 23-06. The Florida Department of Environmental Protection, Office of Resilience and Coastal Protection, continues to play a major role in helping address these real concerns, providing solutions for the state's coastal communities and habitats, with new funding, technical assistance, and coordination among federal, state, regional and local entities.

3. Promoting Economic Growth of Florida's Blue Economy

The Alliance shares the Legislature's commitment to Florida's Blue Economy and recognizes its importance to Florida. We offer our assistance and expertise on the Blue Economy, coastal resilience, and natural infrastructure and invite legislators and state agencies to call upon us as needed. The Alliance's Board of Directors stands ready to help. Florida's economic growth can be achieved in 2024 by enhancing Florida's Blue Economy while improving resiliency and protection of the state's coastline. Leading industries include ocean tourism, ocean transportation, marine industries, ocean recreation, and living resources. With its extensive shoreline and adjacent oceans, Florida has the assets to become a true powerhouse in the Blue Economy through sustainable development, technology innovation, science, industry, and effective environmental management. This requires a balance between growth, use, and stewardship. The Alliance's 2020 Strategic Plan provides the strategies, recommendations, and actions needed to do so, and implementation will result in economic expansion along with improved resilience. Just as importantly, the recommended priorities can be implemented in the near term without extensive added resources.

Florida has the second longest coastline among the US states and territories, second only to Alaska. Coastal counties are home to an overwhelming majority of the state's population at nearly 17 million people, host critical infrastructure, drive robust economic activity, and contribute substantially to Florida's thriving economy. Florida's economy exceeded more than \$1 trillion dollars pre-pandemic in 2018, of which 77 percent was contributed by activities in coastal counties. In fact, the GDP of Florida's coasts exceeds the GDP of 45 states. Ocean resources accounted for over a million jobs and \$73 billion total contribution to the state's GDP in 2018. This rose in 2021, when Florida's economy exceeded more than \$1.2 trillion dollars, with 83 percent contributed by activities in coastal counties. Ocean and coastal resources support Florida's Blue Economy and are critical to the state's prosperity.

Ecological habitats are a vital component in discussions of Florida's economic health yet face threats from climate change and sea level rise, population growth and development, and poor water quality. The state's oceans and coasts are home to important yet sensitive ecological habitats: seagrasses, wetlands, mangroves, beaches, mollusk beds, and coral reefs. Degradation of these invaluable habitats is costly, economically and ecologically, and diminishes quality of life for Floridians. Restoration and conservation of these habitats is crucial to the long-term sustainability of Florida's commercial and recreational fisheries. These habitats provide important storm and coastal protection and help maintain water quality, as well as stabilize and protect shorelines and uplands from wind, waves, and flooding. They also play a critical role in carbon storage and sequestration. Florida beaches extend 825 miles along its coastline and provide enormous economic benefit, as well as value to the environment and quality of life. Beaches are critical to tourists and residents alike and are essential habitats for sea turtles, shorebirds and other marine life. Beaches also function as buffers to protect development and coastal infrastructure from waves during major storms. Protecting natural resources while expanding Florida's Blue Economy are key priorities of the Florida Ocean Alliance.

4. Implementing the Strategic Plan for Florida's Ocean and Coastal Future

The Florida Ocean Alliance has more than 20 years' history of working with State agencies on key policy issues, including the 2020 Strategic Plan for Florida's Oceans and Coasts (funded by the Florida Legislature in 2019). This Plan included key strategies and actions to address four major policy issues in the state:

- Florida's Blue Economy
- Ocean and coastal resilience
- Human and natural infrastructure
- Implementation, outreach and financing

We remain committed to implementing the Florida Ocean Alliance's [2020 Strategic Plan Securing Florida's Blue Economy: A Strategic Plan for Florida's Oceans and Coasts](#) and its recommendations. The Governor's efforts to address environmental issues with his Executive Order 23-06 on Everglades and Wildlife Conservation Commission, and the Department of Commerce. We commend these groups for their efforts in making Florida a leader in environmental issues and in supporting the growth of the Blue Economy. We ask the Governor, State agencies, and the Legislature to consider the Florida Ocean Alliance as a partner in these efforts as we work with the State's policymakers towards protecting the environment while building a strong ocean economy to ensure Florida's future.

About the Florida Ocean Alliance

The [Florida Ocean Alliance](https://www.floridoceanalliance.org) is Florida's leading non-partisan, science-driven, private-public sector partnership comprising leaders from industry, academia, and non-profits. The Alliance focuses on innovative thinking, planning and implementation actions. Our goal is to protect and restore Florida's ocean and coastal assets, while promoting responsible economic growth, diversification and job creation within Florida's ocean and coastal industry clusters. The Florida Ocean Alliance has been serving Florida as a trusted, independent leadership alliance for more than 20 years.

Vision

The Florida Ocean Alliance's vision is to position Florida as a national and global leader in ocean and coastal research, conservation, education, and responsible economic development. We envision a Blue Economy where the state and communities enjoy both economic and environmental resiliency.

Mission

The Florida Ocean Alliance is dedicated to bringing together the private sector, academia, and nonprofit research organizations in Florida to protect and enhance Florida's coastal and ocean resources for social and economic benefit. Using the knowledge gained from working together with disparate groups within these sectors, we offer our resources to advise and guide Florida's resilience efforts, finding and implementing solutions. This helps ensure that the state and communities will continue to protect and benefit from Florida's rich coastal and ocean assets, both economic and environmental.

What We Do

- Monitor and publicize actions related to the oceans and coasts.
- Assist private and public sector stakeholders to develop community consensus and common-sense solutions to complex coastal and ocean challenges.
- Serve as a clearinghouse for information on key ocean and coastal issues facing the state in both the public and private sectors.
- Promote Florida as a global center of excellence in ocean and coastal conservation, research, technology innovation and economic development.
- Provide non-partisan, proven expertise and advice from leaders in industry, academia, non-profits, and public sectors.

How We Do It

- Outreach and educational activities for the public and policy makers.
- Conferences and workshops to identify problems and develop consensus solutions.
- Economic studies and issue papers on ocean and coastal policies, challenges, and opportunities.
- Expert, multi-industry sector advice and testimony on ocean or coastal policy to national or State agencies, commissions.

Florida Ocean Alliance Recent Activities

- ✓ Florida's Coastal Resilience Leadership Meeting, hosted by the Florida Ocean Alliance with Port Tampa Bay, November 2023
- ✓ Florida's Blue Economy Leadership Meeting, hosted by the Florida Ocean Alliance with Royal Caribbean Cruises and Port Everglades, November 2022
- ✓ Webinar on the Blue Economy for Economic Development Administration, U.S. Commerce Dept., June 2023
- ✓ Sponsor of annual Florida Oceans Day at the Capitol in Tallahassee, FL, since 2001, with Mote Marine Laboratory and Florida Institute of Oceanography; 2024 Florida Oceans Day, February 6 and 7, Florida State Capitol
- ✓ Filed comments on National Marine Fisheries Service Vessel Speed Restrictions to Protect Rice's Whales, July 2023
- ✓ Filed comments on U.S. Ocean Climate Action Plan with White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, October 2022
- ✓ Panel participation on Greener Shipping, Coastal Resilience, and Aquaculture for One Ocean Event with Norwegian Consulate in Miami, December 2022
- ✓ Participated with Florida Ports Council Seaport Environmental Management Committee and Florida Institute of Oceanography Council, 2022-2023
- ✓ *Securing Florida's Blue Economy: A Strategic Plan for Florida's Oceans and Coasts*, June 2020 (Legislative Appropriation)
- ✓ Florida Ocean Alliance Annual Dispatch on Florida's Oceans and Coasts for the Florida Governor and Legislature, since 2014