

THE PLAIN DEALER

Deep Thinking

The draft report of the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy has a simple warning embedded in its nearly 500 pages: "Unfortunately, we are starting to love our oceans to death." That should not be ignored, especially since it echoes a finding by the Pew Commission last year.

Just how much do we love the ocean?

Well, about 37 million Americans and 19 million homes are located on the shores of the Atlantic, the Pacific and the Great Lakes.

They share the coastline with a raft of businesses ranging from hotels and restaurants to offshore oil and gas rigs. With about \$700 billion flowing through the nation's ports, there's plenty of money in those waves.

Yet human activity takes a toll on the seas. Urban and farm wastewater may be the cause of "dead zones." Some oceanic regions are overfished while other areas have pollution-ravaged fish. Meanwhile, building and paving along the shore causes soil erosion and destroys habitat.

Fortunately, there is much the nation can do to remedy the damage if ocean management policy is streamlined, according to the first federal review of the world's oceans in more than 30 years.

The report recommends that the government bring coherence to a jumbled ocean policy - dozens of regulations enforced

by dozens of federal agencies - so science can direct a sensible approach to preserving and protecting the ocean's resources.

According to the commission, a new entity, the National Ocean Council, should manage the ocean and collect \$4 billion in royalties from oil and gas reserves, money that now flows to the U.S. Treasury.

The commission, on which oil and shipping executives served alongside scientists and government officials, steered a fair course between fishing interests and environmentalists - two groups with a long history of antagonism.

Both will find something to oppose in the report during the comment period, which ends on May 21.

The fishing industry will dislike the commission's plan to end political squabbling about fishing limits by putting the decision in the hands of scientists, instead of local fishing councils.

The environmentalists, meanwhile, are none too pleased that the report did not call for no-fishing zones.

Still, everyone seems to agree with the report's fundamental premise: that rescuing the oceans from pollution and shoreline overdevelopment will require a radical change in how both land and water resources are managed. That imperative should override all others.