

Grand Forks Herald

An ocean of concern

A new federal report charts a course of sustainability for the oceans and America's coasts

When you live in a place surrounded by waves of crops and grass, it's hard to generate much interest in policies affecting the salt-water oceans. That's especially true in North Dakota, the state that boasts the geographic center of North America and so sits the farthest from the sea.

But don't let that stop you from reviewing the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy's preliminary report, which was released Tuesday. Because where the America's ocean interests are concerned, citizenship - not living in a coastal state - is the qualification that counts.

The bipartisan, 16-member presidential commission has been meeting and taking testimony for nearly three years. Its congressionally mandated mission: To establish findings and develop recommendations for a new and comprehensive national ocean policy.

Its initial conclusion: "Our oceans and coasts are in trouble," said retired Navy Adm. James D. Watkins, the commission's chair.

But "we as a nation have an historic opportunity to make a positive and lasting change in the way we manage them before it is too late."

The costs of misuse of the oceans and America's great coasts are measured in "depleted resources, lost habitat and polluted waters," the report states. To cite just two examples, populations of some commercial fisheries have crashed in recent years, and rampant development has destroyed wetlands, polluted coastlines and severely limited public access to beaches and other parts of the shore.

As the report notes, solving ocean problems is even harder than solving inland issues because the oceans are a "commons" that we share with other nations. Still, there are many policy changes that could help, the report declares. They include such things as establishing a National Ocean Council in the executive office of the president, developing regional ocean councils, reforming fisheries management using science and sustainability practices and setting up an Ocean Policy Trust Fund, using revenues from offshore energy development.

The report seems balanced and thorough - and as important, the recommendations seem doable. Citizens and lawmakers alike should review the report at <http://oceancommission.gov/> with an eye to implementing its findings.