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What Is the *Blue Economy*?

Marine economic activity, which may include activities occurring in the ocean, coastal areas, and Great Lakes, is important for U.S. economic growth and jobs, as well as the livelihoods of Americans, particularly those in coastal communities. However, some activities contribute to overexploitation of marine and coastal resources (e.g., fisheries). Some stakeholders refer to sustainable marine economic activities as the *blue economy*.

Some Members of the 119th Congress continue to examine their “role in bolstering the Blue Economy.” This In Focus discusses definitions of the term blue economy and monetary valuations of the U.S. blue economy. It also presents policy considerations for Congress, including how said definitions and valuations may impact policy decisions and congressional support for related activities.

Blue Economy Definitions

Congress has directed federal agencies to define the blue economy and provided a statutory definition of the term. In 2022, Congress directed the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), in consultation with other agencies, to define the term in a report to Congress (Title CI, P.L. 117-263; 33 U.S.C. §3613(c)). The definition was due no later than December 23, 2024; CRS has not been able to locate the mandated report. In 2023, NOAA defined the blue economy as the “sustainable, equitable and socially inclusive use of ocean and Great Lakes resources to benefit economies, livelihoods and ocean ecosystem health.” It is unclear whether the 2023 definition is in response to P.L. 117-263 or a separate effort.

In December 2024, Congress defined the blue economy as “the sustainable use of marine, lake, or other aquatic resources in support of economic development objectives” in the context of economic development activities supported by the Secretary of Commerce (Title II of P.L. 118-272; 42 U.S.C. 3122).

Other entities have additional definitions for the term blue economy. Some use the term when referring to the collective economic value of the resources, uses, and activities of the ocean and coasts, which may or may not include sustainable uses and activities. This definition is sometimes used interchangeably with other terms, such as *ocean economy* and *marine economy*. For example, in 2019, the Department of Energy (DOE) described the blue economy as “comprised of sectors and activities that span commerce and trade; living resources; renewable energy; minerals, materials, freshwater; and ocean health and data” and noted that many of these sectors show an increased focus on sustainability.

Others use the term when referring to the use of ocean and coastal resources that balances economic prosperity and environmental sustainability. For example, in 2022, the Department of State noted that blue economies “advance ocean health alongside economic prosperity, providing sustainable food, power, and transportation.” The World Bank also defines the blue economy as the “sustainable use of ocean resources for economic growth, improved livelihoods and jobs, and ocean ecosystem health.” Because of the different goals under different definitions of the term, some stakeholders argue that the term blue economy may mislead the public about the environmental benefits of a certain use. In this context, some have proposed alternative terms for blue economy, such as *sustainable ocean economy*, *sustainable blue economy*, and *regenerative blue economy*.

Value of the U.S. Blue Economy

In the United States, the Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA), in partnership with NOAA, tracks revenues and jobs associated with the marine economy through its Marine Economy Satellite Account (MESA). As noted above, some stakeholders use the terms blue economy and marine economy interchangeably. MESA includes 10 broad sectors (in order of 2022 sales, high to low; most recent data available): tourism and recreation, national defense and public administration, offshore minerals (including oil and gas), transportation and warehousing, living resources, ship and boat building, coastal utilities, research and education, professional and technical services, and marine construction. In 2022, the marine economy accounted for 1.8%, or \$476.2 billion, of the U.S. gross domestic product (GDP), with tourism and recreation as the largest contributor, at \$219.7 billion. The marine economy supported 2.4 million jobs in 2022. In addition, the 2022 MESA estimate included offshore wind energy activities for the first time; offshore wind construction totaled \$161 million, and alternative power generation totaled \$10 million.

As part of P.L. 117-263, mentioned above, Congress directed NOAA to establish a program to measure the value and impact of the U.S. blue economy and to report on that value with respect to each U.S. state and territory (33 U.S.C. §3613). Congress identified industries related to the Great Lakes, oceans, bays, estuaries, and coasts (33 U.S.C. §3613(a)), to include

military uses, living resources, marine construction, marine transportation, offshore energy development and siting..., offshore mineral production, ship and boat building, tourism, recreation, subsistence, commercial, recreational, and charter fishing, seafood processing, and other

fishery-related businesses, aquaculture . . . , and other industries.

Congress also directed NOAA to work with BEA and other federal agencies to develop a new BEA Coastal and Ocean Economy Satellite Account to measure the contribution of these industries to the U.S. economy. It is unclear in the law whether the terms blue economy and coastal and ocean economy are meant to be synonymous, and how industries in the Coastal and Ocean Economy Satellite Account would differ from the existing MESA.

Some organizations have estimated the value of a potentially similar group of activities, termed the *ocean economy*. For example, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) included the following activities as part of the ocean economy: tourism; offshore oil and gas extraction and industry; maritime transport and ports; marine fishing, aquaculture, and fish processing; shipbuilding and maritime equipment manufacturing; maritime trade and research and development services; and offshore wind and marine renewables. According to a 2025 OECD report, between 2008 and 2020, the United States had the largest ocean economy in absolute terms and Norway had the largest ocean economy as a proportion of its overall economy (in terms of gross value added).

Policy Considerations

Congress may consider several issues related to the blue economy, including how the term is defined and valued and congressional support for activities that may be a part of the blue economy.

Need for a Blue Economy Definition?

Congress may consider whether to provide additional clarity to agencies on the definition of the term blue economy or similar terms and whether agency-specific definitions are most appropriate to reflect differing agency missions. In addition, Congress may consider whether further definitions in statute may cause confusion or conflict across agencies. As discussed above, Congress directed NOAA to define the term blue economy in 2022 and defined the term in the context of the Secretary of Commerce and economic development in legislation enacted in 2024. It is unclear how the NOAA and statutory definitions, if different, may complement or conflict with each other.

Some Members of Congress continue to consider definitions for the blue economy. Some Members consider the blue economy in terms of the industries that contribute to the U.S. GDP. For example, in the 119th Congress, H.R. 3048/S. 1392 would define the blue economy, in the context of Department of Commerce and other agency responsibilities, as “the value and impact of sustainable industries related to the Great Lakes, oceans, bays, estuaries, and coasts on the economy of the United States” and would specify a list of industries to include. In previous Congresses, some Members would have defined the blue economy in the context of other federal agencies and uses. For example, H.R. 7722 in the 118th Congress would have defined the blue economy, in the context of DOE authorities, as “the sustainable use of ocean and aquatic resources to grow the economy, improve livelihoods, and

create jobs in a manner that preserves the health of ocean and aquatic ecosystems.”

Differences between definitions of the blue economy (and other terms used interchangeably) directly impact valuations of the blue economy, as the definition may specify what industries, activities, resources, uses, environments, or geographic areas are included. Some stakeholders also have proposed to include *ecosystem services*—the benefits to people provided by the natural environment—in valuations of the U.S. economy. For example, marine and coastal ecosystem services, such as flood management and carbon sequestration and storage, may contribute to the U.S. blue economy. Measuring aspects of the blue economy may be challenging due to a lack of consensus on how to value ecosystem services.

Supporting Blue Economy Activities

Congress has authorized federal agencies to support activities that may be included in the blue economy. Some Members in the 119th Congress have introduced legislation that would support domestic and foreign blue economy activities or industries. For example, H.R. 562 would support sustainable fisheries and marine conservation efforts in the Pacific Islands, activities potentially a part of the blue economy. Some in Congress have argued that conservation measures, such as national marine sanctuary designations, harm local fishers and economies. Other stakeholders may contend that such protections serve as the basis for many blue economy activities or would indirectly facilitate the blue economy through research, observations, and monitoring in conservation areas. S. 759 aims to support marine recreational activities by directing federal agencies to standardize and digitize certain types of data related to outdoor recreational use. The bill would require data to be made publicly available to support outdoor enthusiasts.

Other bills would more directly address the blue economy. For instance, H.R. 3048/S. 1392 would designate and fund regional Ocean Innovation Clusters to “contribute to the equitable and sustainable growth of the Blue Economy across all sectors.” The bills also would direct NOAA, BEA, and other relevant agencies to “use and refine” MESA to measure the value to and impact of Ocean Innovation Clusters on the blue economy.

The 119th Congress may deliberate on how the Trump Administration has directly or indirectly impacted the U.S. blue economy or specific industries or activities within it. For example, a January 2025 Trump Administration memorandum mandated several actions affecting offshore wind leasing and permitting on the U.S. outer continental shelf. An April 2025 Trump Administration proclamation opened the Pacific Remote Islands Marine National Monument (also known as the Pacific Islands Heritage Marine National Monument) to U.S. commercial fishing within 50-200 nautical miles of the monument’s borders. Congress may conduct oversight of or reverse, amend, or codify in statute these changes, among other considerations.

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