



# 2024 Southern New England Marine Debris Action Plan

February 2024

Photo: NOAA

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## Acknowledgments

The Southern New England Marine Debris Action Plan (Action Plan) was developed through expert input from stakeholders across Rhode Island and Massachusetts. The Action Plan was compiled by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Marine Debris Program, with support from a University of Rhode Island graduate student, Emma Janson (Master of Arts in Marine Affairs, 2023). Many thanks to the workshop attendees and others who contributed to the Action Plan and will participate in its implementation.

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Several objectives contained herein reference potential legislative changes. These objectives will be carried out by interested partner organizations and are not affiliated with NOAA or the Marine Debris Program.

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# Introduction

In the United States, marine debris is defined as “any persistent solid material that is manufactured or processed and directly or indirectly, intentionally or unintentionally, disposed of or abandoned into the marine environment or the Great Lakes” (33 U.S.C. § 1956). The coasts and waters of Rhode Island and Southern Massachusetts face many of the same marine debris threats as other geographies across the Northeast Region; however, the economies and communities of Southern New England present unique opportunities to understand and address these challenges. From being a popular tourist destination with a rich textile manufacturing history, to changing fishing industries and global research efforts, Southern New England is well positioned to continue working across disciplines to implement marine debris solutions at a local and global scale.

The Southern New England Marine Debris Action Plan (Action Plan) is a collaborative effort of nearly 30 contributing organizations. Representatives from state and federal government agencies, nonprofit and for-profit organizations, education groups, research institutions, and universities all had a significant role in its development. Their collective experience and various expertise lends years of knowledge to marine debris prevention, removal, and research in Southern New England.

## Action Plan Purpose

The Action Plan establishes a framework to ensure participants can collaborate on common goals focused on cleaning and protecting the coasts and waters of Rhode Island and Southern Massachusetts from the negative impacts of marine debris. This Action Plan encompasses work that will be conducted over the next five years (2024 - 2029).

The Action Plan is composed of five goals: Prevention and Removal, Research and Monitoring, Coordination, Collection and Disposition, and Policy and Management. These goals, developed through a series of virtual workshops and participant feedback throughout 2023, represent the community’s marine debris priorities.

The participants of this Action Plan are dedicated to engaging diverse audiences across Southern New England. The environmental, social, economic, and human health benefits as well as the possible burden shifts associated with collecting, recycling, reusing, and disposing of marine debris will be at the forefront of discussions and implemented actions. These priorities will remain in place throughout the life of the Action Plan and beyond its expiration.

The Southern New England marine debris community recognizes the need for this Action Plan to be reevaluated within the five-year time-frame. Unforeseen challenges or gaps in these efforts may arise during its implementation. Therefore, a mid-Action Plan review and evaluation will be performed at the halfway-point of implementation to better understand which goals and objectives are well supported and achievable, and which ones may require further assistance. At this time, elements of the Action Plan may be adapted and new goals and/or objectives may be added. Upon the conclusion of the five years, the Action Plan will undergo a final evaluation and an accomplishments report will be generated.

Due to the complexity of marine debris issues, many stakeholders can play a role in the Action Plan’s implementation; including individuals, federal, state, and local governments, private businesses and industries, as well as non-governmental and academic organizations. All are welcome to participate in these efforts, and can engage directly by emailing the NOAA Marine Debris Program’s Northeast Regional Coordinator, Demi Fox, at [demi.fox@noaa.gov](mailto:demi.fox@noaa.gov).

## Action Plan Tracking

Regular communication is essential to maintain the strategic partnerships needed to accomplish the goals of this Action Plan. The NOAA Marine Debris Program will facilitate the overall coordination of check-ins and reporting, compile progress updates, and share information with the Action Plan participants. The Action Plan is organized by objectives that fall within each goal. Ongoing and upcoming projects that fulfill each objective will be tracked internally throughout the life of the Action Plan.



# Goal 1: Prevention and Removal

## Expected Outcomes

*There are decreased quantities of marine debris on the beaches and in the waters of Southern New England due to the reduction of single-use items, education initiatives, and dedicated removal efforts.*

*Students and volunteers work to collect fishing gear debris from Cuttyhunk Island, Massachusetts (Photo: Sarah Thornington).*

## Objectives

- 1.1 Identify debris types of special concern in the region (e.g., most prevalent, most harmful to wildlife/ecosystems/communities, etc.)
- 1.2 Develop or adapt outreach materials to share best management practices for the prevention and removal of identified debris types
- 1.3 Engage entities (e.g., businesses, organizations, schools, fishermen, tribes, and others) in efforts to eliminate debris types of special concern and adopt prevention methods (e.g., implementing reusable or circular alternatives)
- 1.4 Conduct shoreline and at-sea removal of marine debris in Rhode Island and Southern Massachusetts using best practices identified and shared by Action Plan participants
- 1.5 Engage diverse entities in removal efforts to raise awareness and inspire behavior change

## Common Metrics

- Number of youth and adults reached through formal and informal education
- Number of outreach materials developed or adapted for use in Southern New England
- Number of organizations and businesses engaged
- Pounds of marine debris removed
- Number of categorized items removed from the marine environment



## Goal 2: Research and Monitoring

### Expected Outcomes

Stakeholders in Rhode Island and Southern Massachusetts can better support marine debris intervention goals due to an increased understanding of the presence and impacts of marine debris in the region.

*Students and volunteers record data of marine debris collected from Cuttyhunk Island, Massachusetts (Photo: Sarah Thornington).*

### Objectives

- 2.1 Understand the drivers that cause anthropogenic items to become marine debris (e.g., behaviors, policies, conditions, etc.), as well as barriers to the access and use of reusable and circular alternatives
- 2.2 Collect, compile, and share new and existing data on the types and quantity of marine debris, as well as the impacts of removal efforts on wildlife, ecosystems, and communities
- 2.3 Research alternatives to plastics and other materials that comprise marine debris of special concern; identify market and policy channels to facilitate the development of these alternatives, reduce barriers to access, and encourage increased reuse and circularity
- 2.4 Collaborate with diverse audiences, such as students and underrepresented communities affected by marine debris and removal efforts, on regional research projects
- 2.5 Prioritize monitoring where possible to quantify the success of marine debris prevention, removal, research, and policy efforts; share results, best practices, and lessons learned with Action Plan participants and policy makers to develop evidence-based suggestions to introduce or change existing policies in Rhode Island and Massachusetts

### Common Metrics

- Number of organizations, communities, and entities engaged
- Number of reusable and circular alternatives developed/researched/funded
- Number of marine debris-related studies collected/compiled
- Number of datasets shared between Action Plan participants and other stakeholders



## Goal 3: Coordination

### Expected Outcomes

*Stakeholders in Rhode Island and Southern Massachusetts work together to coordinate efforts, have a thorough understanding of the ongoing and upcoming marine debris-related work in the region; and benefit from sharing data, resources, successes, and lessons learned in regional, national, and international forums.*

*Volunteers work to remove legacy aquaculture gear from the sand flats in Provincetown, Massachusetts (Photo: NOAA).*

### Objectives

- 3.1 Establish a regular reporting structure for participants of the Action Plan that includes progress toward achieving objectives and topic-based discussions; create a sustained partnership for stakeholders in the Southern New England region
- 3.2 Coordinate cross-regional symposia that connect Marine Debris Action Plan participants to share best practices, data collection protocols, lessons learned, etc.
- 3.3 Attend/present at external regional forums and share information with participants of the Action Plan to encourage collaboration; provide financial support to organizations that do not have marine debris programs and/or funding in place for such opportunities
- 3.4 Compile resources, funding opportunities, and information learned through objectives of the Action Plan to share with relevant stakeholders
- 3.5 Share opportunities to engage both existing and non-traditional stakeholders in marine debris efforts in the region

### Common Metrics

- Number of updates from Action Plan participants that reflect progress toward achieving objectives
- Number of regional marine debris meetings and workshops held and number of participants in attendance
- Number of national or international forums attended/presented at
- Development and use of a platform for collaboration
- Number of stakeholders joining and participating in the Action Plan



## Goal 4: Collection and Disposition

### Expected Outcomes

*Undesirable disposal methods decrease as a result of new or expanded disposal, recycling, or reuse programs, increased awareness of alternative disposal methods, and shared best practices for more efficient handling of debris items. In the Southern New England Marine Debris Action Plan, disposition is defined as the final arrangement for how an item will be reused, recycled, or disposed of.*

*Fishing gear debris collected from Cuttyhunk Island, Massachusetts (Photo: NOAA).*

### Objectives

- 4.1 Identify the methods, technologies, infrastructure, expertise, and capacity available to appropriately dispose of, recycle, or reuse marine debris items
- 4.2 Conduct environmental, social, economic, and human health life cycle assessments to quantify benefits and possible burden shifts associated with collecting and appropriately recycling, reusing, or disposing of waste that has the potential to become marine debris
- 4.3 Establish and pilot test best practices for disposal, recycling, and reuse determined through previous objectives
- 4.4 Share opportunities to dispose of, recycle, or reuse specific waste types (e.g., shrink wrap recycling programs, tire collection events, derelict fishing gear repurposing) with relevant communities
- 4.5 Consider the establishment of sustained collection methods (e.g., bins, cleanup events) for used or derelict fishing gear that incorporate community involvement and build on regional expertise, lessons learned, and best practices

### Common Metrics

- Pounds of marine debris diverted from landfill
- Number of items diverted from landfill
- Number of disposal events hosted
- Number of disposal, recycling, or reuse programs created or maintained
- Number of disposal, recycling, or reuse processes that include economic, social, and environmental life cycle assessments





## Goal 5: Policy and Management

### Expected Outcomes

*Outdated regulations are positioned to be updated, definitions of debris items are refined in statutory language, and authorities for removal or disposal are more permissive as a result.*

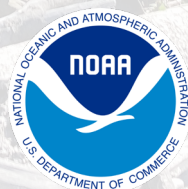
*Debris collected from a shoreline cleanup in Provincetown, Massachusetts (Photo: NOAA).*

### Objectives

- 5.1 Compile information and protocols regarding the policies surrounding personal property and private property (e.g., derelict fishing gear, abandoned and derelict vessels, infrastructure) in Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and federal waters
- 5.2 Develop a knowledge base of existing, in-process, proposed, and enforced legislation in Rhode Island, Massachusetts, and neighboring states that directly relates to the problem of marine debris; share results, lessons learned, and opportunities for regional efforts
- 5.3 Engage companies, businesses, and private sector organizations in eliminating or reducing plastic packaging; investigate the role of state/federal policy in private sector efforts to adopt reusable or circular alternatives
- 5.4 Meaningfully engage communities in the development and implementation of new policies through education and outreach
- 5.5 Analyze the distribution of benefits from existing marine debris prevention policies to various groups and communities; assess equity and the changes required to improve benefits to all communities

### Common Metrics

- Frequency of local-, state-, or region-level working group or task force meetings
- Number of local, county, or state mandates, regulations, or bylaws impacted or implemented



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*Photo: Center for Coastal Studies.*