

# **The Governors' South Atlantic Alliance: A Call To Action Framework**

## **A Call to Action**

Florida, Georgia, South Carolina and North Carolina share an extraordinarily rich array of ocean and coastal resources that provide enormous economic, environmental and social benefits for each state. However, those resources face significant and growing stress. Pollution, declining fishery resources, degraded coastal habitats, vulnerability to natural hazards and rapid population growth and development are primary examples of serious challenges to the sustainability of coastal resources in the region. Furthermore, the similarity of issues and habitats plus the connectivity of ocean resources such as coastal watersheds, fisheries and ocean currents across state jurisdictions calls for collective action. For instance, many coastal watersheds involve multiple states, while fish populations migrate seasonally throughout the four-state region.

Recently, two national ocean commissions and the President's United States Ocean Action Plan called for meaningful collaboration at all levels of ocean and coastal research and actions to restore and maintain our ocean resources. Several major regional alliances (e.g., West Coast, Gulf of Mexico, and Northeast) have been established and have successfully leveraged resources to meet common goals. This regional alliance framework is in response to that collective call for action.

## **Regional Context**

Changes in economics, culture, environmental quality, resource use and growth have occurred in the Southeast at an accelerated pace. The resulting pressures placed on the Southeast's natural, environmental, economic, and cultural resources, as well as national defense are increasing exponentially on a regional scale. The complexity of multiple and interdependent resource issues undergoing rapid change creates new challenges and an urgent need for new responses. Our growing understanding of the relationship of humans with the marine environment is leading us to explore new ecosystem-based approaches to coastal management that engages multiple state jurisdictions. The urgency of the situation calls for developing coordinated regional actions by the states in conjunction with supporting partners and leveraging multiple resources to help address critical issues in sustaining our coastal and ocean ecosystems.

Improved coordination among state governments and effective engagement of federal and local governments, academia and coastal and ocean stakeholders is critical to this effort. An integrated regional action is needed to guide research, planning, and management activities that address critical ocean and coastal issues facing all four states. In the following sections, we outline the framework and basis for a regional alliance among the four states, including a structure and process for stakeholders' involvement. Through this alliance, we seek to advance the member states' mutual interests in initial priority South Atlantic coastal and marine issue areas needing attention and action while jointly engaging federal agencies and regional constituencies on significant regional coastal and ocean issues that warrant their support.

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## The South Atlantic Alliance



The South Atlantic Alliance (Alliance) will complement existing regional arrangements. Most importantly, the Alliance will serve as a conduit for collectively finding, acting on, and regionally implementing science-based actions to sustain the coastal and ocean ecosystems. The Alliance will provide a method for more efficiently and effectively balancing and sustaining ecological capacity, economic vitality, quality of life, public safety and national security mission requirements. The Alliance will provide a partnership of state leaders, supported by federal and local governments, with private and public assistance.

## South Atlantic Regional Priority Issues

The following initial priority issues have been identified as being timely and of mutual importance to the sustainability of the South Atlantic region's resources. None of these issues are limited by state boundaries.

### Healthy Ecosystems

The South Atlantic supports a diverse array of coastal, estuarine, nearshore and offshore ecosystems, including seagrass beds, wetlands and marshes, mangroves, barrier islands, sand dunes, coral reefs and other "live bottom" formations, maritime forests, streams and rivers. These ecosystems provide ecological and economic benefits including improved water quality, nurseries for fish, wildlife habitat, hurricane and flood buffers, erosion prevention, stabilized shorelines, tourism, jobs, recreation, and support for national defense and homeland security activities. The ecosystems include a range of recreationally and commercially important species, and federally and state protected species. Further, many species and habitats are facing a variety of threats including invasive non-native species, habitat alterations, fishing pressures, population growth in coastal areas, climate change and degraded water quality. Most importantly, all of these pressures are linked.

There are opportunities to enhance and support ecosystem-based management efforts within the region. The objective of these efforts is to improve ecosystem structure and function; improve economic, social and cultural benefits from resources; and improve biological, economic, and cultural diversity in the South Atlantic region. Achieving these goals requires a more thorough understanding of the scope, scale and distribution of resources within the region. Less than five percent of the coastal ocean region of the southeastern United States has been mapped. A significant need exists for standardized, integrated, and accessible spatial and temporal data for the management of coastal marine resources in our region. The Alliance will enhance collaboration necessary to address region-wide ecosystem issues.

### Working Waterfronts

Working waterfronts require direct access to coastal public trust waters and submerged lands. The term, working waterfronts, includes water-dependent facilities and related shore-side infrastructure that offer access or support facilities for recreation, commerce, research, and other public uses including military operations (Coast Guard, Navy, etc.). Examples of these facilities

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include: seafood harvesters and processors; public wet and dry marinas; boat construction and repair facilities; recreational fishing facilities, including fishing piers and for-hire vessel operations; aquaculture facilities; marine transportation (e.g., ferries and cruise ships) and ports for seaborne commerce. It is important to address these issues in a timely manner because there are limited remaining areas suitable as working waterfronts.

Working waterfronts face a number of challenges and high among them is the future of our ports and other water access points. Growth, environmental degradation and displacement are some of the issues facing traditional working waterfront communities. Homeland security requires better control of our coastal facilities both for protection as well as for military operations. Finally, climate change and associated environmental factors such as storm intensity and sea-level changes are emerging issues.

While the southeastern United States is one of the least developed in the nation, according to the Census Bureau, our four southeastern states contain one-third of the nation's 100 fastest-growing counties. The projected percent change in population from 2000 to 2030 in North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia and Florida is an increase of 51.9 percent, 28.3 percent, 46.8 percent, and 79.5 percent, respectively. Much of the growth is concentrated in coastal counties, and is outpacing our ability to understand, react, and plan for changes in environmental, social, and economic conditions. Sustaining robust waterfront cultural traditions, commerce, adequate access and use of public trust waters, and infrastructure in the face of this growth is crucial.

Major port complexes in the South Atlantic are of vital economic importance to the nation's vast international trade and the region's link to global commerce. Ships are increasing in size, requiring deeper and wider channels. Competition for vital water frontage will increase as the number of larger and faster vessels calling on regional ports increases.

Other water dependent businesses (e.g., recreational and commercial fishing, diving, eco-tours, and water sports) as well as national defense readiness needs are threatened by the conversion of working waterfronts to private residences, condominiums, and marinas. The increase in these waterfront usages results in additional impervious surfaces, and the resulting stormwater runoff causes further degradation of water quality. Coastal and land use planning tools, effective incentives to preserve and enhance the region's coastal waterfront heritage and protect access to the public trust resources of the South Atlantic are examples of such tools. The Alliance will strive to more effectively manage these changes, by striking a balance among new development, historic uses, port expansion, and sustaining resources for the future.

### Clean Coastal and Ocean Waters

Significant impacts to estuarine water quality, and coastal ecosystem health are predicted as a result of increasing coastal urbanization. Growth and development are already placing enormous pressures on coastal resources and the adjacent coastal ocean. At the same time, climate change is influencing salinity levels, saltwater intrusion and rise in ocean levels. Both point and non-point discharges from land-based and atmospheric sources are affecting our ground water, rivers, estuaries and the oceans' water column.

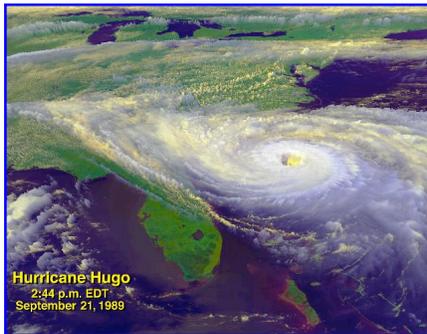
Impacts are also evidenced by the increased number of advisories and closures caused by high bacteria levels and harmful algal blooms implicated in fish kills and human health dangers. Variable loads of sediment, nutrients, and pollutants interact with the coastal ocean to influence

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processes. The Alliance will view the impacts in a state and regional context to enhance managers' ability to effectively target prevention, enforcement, response, mitigation activities, and integrate coastal and ocean observing systems in the South Atlantic.

### Disaster-Resilient Communities

Both short-term and long-term changes in weather and climate are major concerns in the southeastern United States. These changes threaten our coastal communities, a multi-billion dollar tourism industry, coastal and watershed development and infrastructure, and local fishing industries. There is a solid history of cooperation among state and private responders in times of emergency. Building upon that, we can share best practices as we prepare for the next emergency



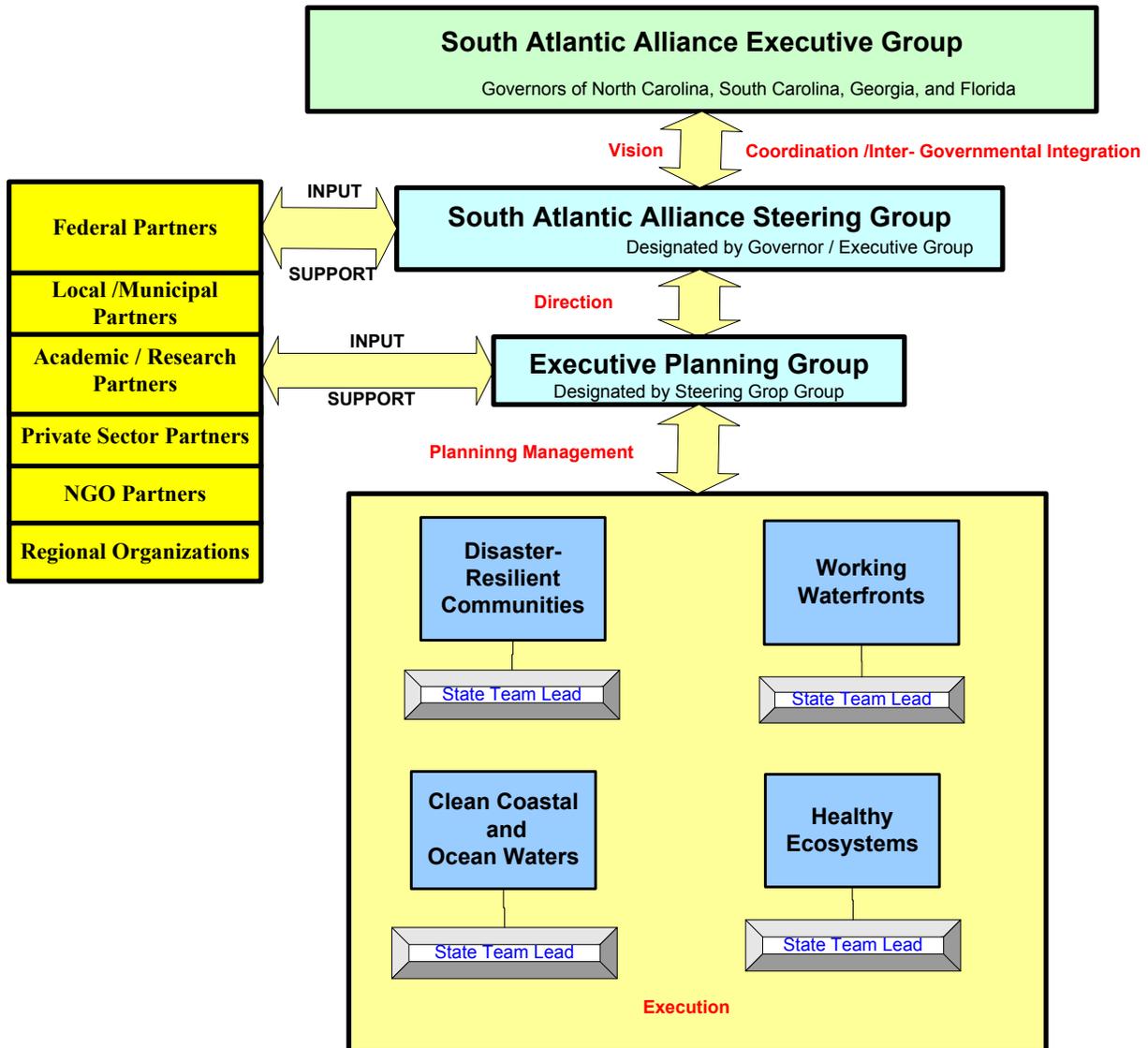
to minimize losses and accelerate recovery. Coastal storms account for 71 percent of recent U.S. disaster losses annually. Each event costs roughly \$500 million. Hurricanes Hugo, Andrew, Rita, Isabel and Wilma have reinforced the need for the region to better prepare our communities through risk reduction and damage prevention, mitigation, response, and recovery strategies.

Understanding our vulnerability to, and the impacts of, storms and climate change will enable coastal and natural resource managers and community decision-makers to adapt their management strategies, improve planning and preparedness, and develop mitigation strategies to address impacts to public safety, shoreline change, coastal infrastructure, habitat loss, and species migration and natural resources. Emergency responders and community planners must also develop and implement new strategies to minimize risk to property and industries located in our coastal counties. Long-term climate change and accelerated sea level rise have also emerged as important issues for our region. The Alliance will work to greatly enhance our understanding of ocean and weather dynamics and improve prediction, observation and forecasting capabilities.

### Alliance Framework and Outcomes

The Alliance organization will function based on rules that optimize the ability to develop and sustain an effective working relationship among the partners to identify and seize opportunities for mutual gain.

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The Alliance structure and framework will provide the foundation for key outcomes supporting the vitality of the region in a balanced manner. Furthermore, it is our intent that the Alliance will provide:

- An organizational structure and forum for collaboration, coordination and a clearing house for information supporting cooperative activities and coastal and ocean decision making;
- Regional sustainability of resources that supports individual state requirements;
- Better regional alignment of decisions resulting in mutual mission accomplishment;
- Cooperative planning and leveraging of resources to produce multiple state and regional benefits;
- Integrated research, observation and mapping of the South Atlantic region leading to common and coordinated data and information to enhance science-based decision making;
- Integrated solutions that benefit all systems' requirements (i.e., ecosystems, economic systems, and national defense systems) at state, federal and local levels; and
- Increase the level of awareness of policymakers and the public to the challenges facing the South Atlantic region.

## **Governors' South Atlantic Alliance Framework Continued**

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