Determining Marine Boundaries

It's not what it used to be

Marine Boundary Setting Yesterday and Today

Historically, ocean tenure has been held by the country with the largest naval fleet and the desire to control “its” waters. Boundaries often were defined as the reach of the most powerful cannon from land. As recently as 25 years ago, NOAA nautical charts rarely depicted a maritime boundary of any type. Times have changed. Technological advances in surveying, mapping, and data collection have greatly improved man's ability to determine his exact position on earth. Maritime transportation-related companies use the Global Positioning System (GPS), geographic information systems (GIS), and electronic charting display information systems to determine and document exact locations in the ocean. Even pleasure boaters are making use of onboard GPS devices.

The stakes are rising when it comes to the importance of a cadastral, which is a record of interests in land (or water) encompassing both the nature and the extent of those interests. Cadastral boundaries are necessary for the enforcement of a myriad of laws that have to do with commerce, natural resources, property rights, research, law enforcement, and environmental policies. The need for official, accurate, usable, and accessible digital boundaries to define jurisdictional claims is unprecedented for business in today's ocean.

National Boundary Explanations

Creating Digital Boundaries

NOAA's National Ocean Service (NOS) is responsible for charting the nation's coastal waters and, therefore, is the lead agency for portraying the maritime limits of the United States. Marine boundaries may be classified as national in scope. Examples of national boundaries are the Territorial Sea, Contiguous Zone, and the Exclusive Economic Zone. A site-specific boundary includes cadaster for parks, sanctuaries, and lease blocks for oil and gas or aquaculture.

Currently, digital ocean cadastral boundaries are not legally recognized. Boundaries exist in hard copy (paper form) only on NOAA nautical charts, treaties, and within the U.S. Code of Federal Regulations. NOAA is working with the Minerals Management Service to determine a digital baseline from which the State Seaward line, Territorial Sea, Contiguous Zone, and other boundaries can be calculated. The two agencies will then look to the Interagency Committee on the Delimitation of the United States Baseline, commonly referred to as the Baseline Committee, for official recognition of these digital data.

What is the United States' Response to Marine Boundary Issues?

Federal Geographic Data Committee (FGDC) Marine Boundary Working Group

To address marine boundary issues, numerous government agencies are working together and combining their talents, expertise, and resources through the FGDC Marine Boundary Working Group. This group is:

- Developing standardized methodologies to produce better marine boundary data
- Standardizing the legal, scientific, and technical terms used to describe marine boundaries
- Working together to maximize resources and avoid duplication of effort
- Creating dissemination mechanisms for marine boundary data

Participating agencies include the U.S. Minerals Management Services, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the National Park Service, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the National Imagery and Mapping Agency, the Federal Communications Commission, the Census Bureau, the U.S. State Department, the U.S. Navy, the U.S. Coast Guard, and Bureau of Land Management, and the State of Florida.

For more information, visit www.csc.noaa.gov/mbwg/.