

PRIMER ON OCEAN JURISDICTIONS: DRAWING LINES IN THE WATER

Although invisible to the naked eye, governments have carved the world's oceans into many zones, based on both international and domestic laws. These zones are often complex, with overlapping legal authorities and agency responsibilities. Internationally, the closer one gets to the shore, the more authority a coastal nation has. Similarly, for domestic purposes, the closer one gets to the shore, the more control an individual U.S. state has.

This primer explains the ocean jurisdiction of the United States under international law, as well as the domestic distinction between federal and state waters (Figure P.1).

THE BASELINE (0 Miles)

For purposes of both international and domestic law, the boundary line dividing the land from the ocean is called the *baseline*. The baseline is determined according to principles described in the 1958 United Nations Convention on the Territorial Sea and the Contiguous Zone and the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (LOS Convention), and is normally the low water line along the coast, as marked on charts officially recognized by the coastal nation. In the United States, the definition has been further refined based on federal court decisions; the U.S. baseline is the mean lower low water line along the coast, as shown on official U.S. nautical charts. The baseline is drawn across river mouths, the opening of bays, and along the outer points of complex coastlines. Water bodies inland of the baseline—such as bays, estuaries, rivers, and lakes—are considered “internal waters” subject to national sovereignty.

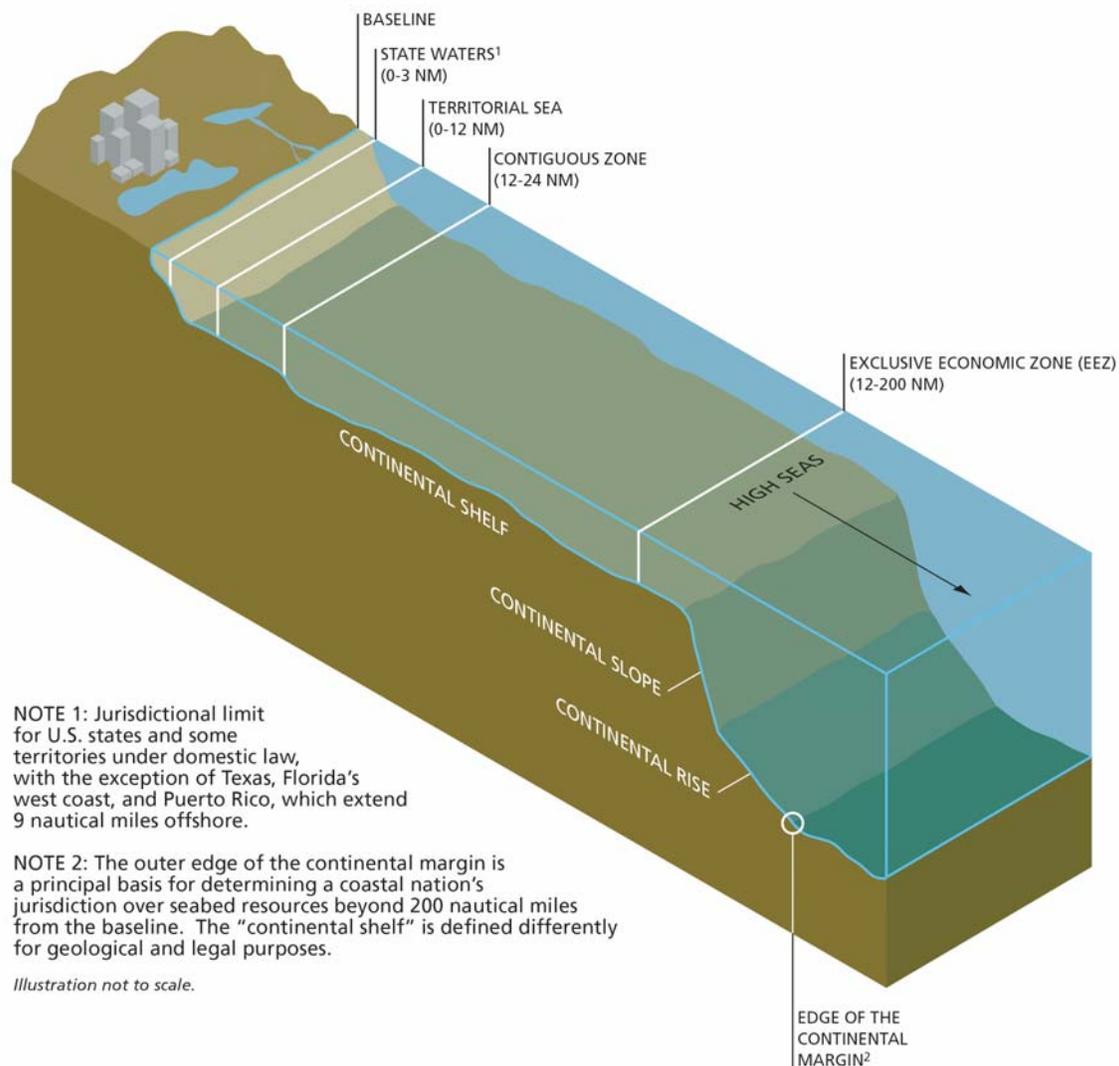
STATE SEAWARD BOUNDARIES IN THE UNITED STATES

(0 to 3 Nautical Miles; 0 to 9 Nautical Miles for Texas, Florida's Gulf Coast and Puerto Rico)

In the 1940s, several states claimed jurisdiction over mineral and other resources off their coasts. This was overturned in 1947 when the Supreme Court determined that states had no title to, or property interest in, these resources. In response, the Submerged Lands Act was enacted in 1953 giving coastal states jurisdiction over a region extending 3 nautical miles seaward from the baseline, commonly referred to as *state waters*. For historical reasons, Texas and the Gulf Coast of Florida are an exception, with state waters extending to 9 nautical miles offshore. (Note: A nautical mile is approximately 6,076 feet. All references hereafter to miles in this Primer are actually nautical miles.) Subsequent legislation granted the U.S. Virgin Islands, Guam, and American Samoa jurisdiction out to 3 miles, while Puerto Rico has a 9-mile jurisdictional boundary.

The federal government retains the power to regulate commerce, navigation, power generation, national defense, and international affairs throughout state waters. However, states are given the authority to manage, develop, and lease resources throughout the water column and on and under the seafloor. (States have similar authorities on the land side of the baseline, usually up to the mean high tide line, an area known as state tidelands.)

Figure P.1. Lines of U.S. Authority in Offshore Waters



Several jurisdictional zones exist off the coast of the United States for purposes of international and domestic law. Within these zones, the United States asserts varying degrees of authority over offshore activities, including living and nonliving resource management, shipping and maritime transportation, and national security. A nation's jurisdictional authority is greatest near the coast.

In general, states must exercise their authority for the benefit of the public, consistent with the public trust doctrine. Under this doctrine, which has evolved from ancient Roman law and English common law, governments have an obligation to protect the interests of the general public (as opposed to the narrow interests of specific users or any particular group) in tidelands and in the water column and submerged lands below navigable waters. Public interests have traditionally included navigation, fishing, and commerce. In recent times, the public has also looked to the government to protect their interests in recreation, environmental protection, research, and preservation of scenic beauty and cultural heritage.

THE TERRITORIAL SEA (0 to 12 Nautical Miles)

Under international law, every coastal nation has sovereignty over the air space, water column, seabed, and subsoil of its *territorial sea*, subject to certain rights of passage for foreign vessels and, in more limited circumstances, foreign aircraft.

Prior to 1988, the United States claimed a territorial sea out to 3 miles. In that year, President Reagan proclaimed a 12-mile territorial sea for the United States, consistent with provisions in the LOS Convention. The proclamation extended the territorial sea only for purposes of international law, explicitly stating that there was no intention to alter domestic law.

Acknowledging Change: The Need to Update Federal Laws

Over the past twenty years, U.S. presidents have issued a series of proclamations changing the extent and nature of U.S. authority over the oceans. The changes, creating a territorial sea to 12 miles, a contiguous zone to 24 miles, and an exclusive economic zone to 200 miles, have not been comprehensively reflected in domestic laws. Many laws also use imprecise or inconsistent terms to refer to ocean areas, such as “navigable waters,” “coastal waters,” “ocean waters,” “territory and waters,” “waters of the United States,” and “waters subject to the jurisdiction of the United States.” These terms can mean different things in different statutes and sometimes are not defined at all.

Legal disputes have already occurred over the seaward extent of jurisdiction of the Endangered Species Act and the National Environmental Policy Act. The Clean Water Act and the Oil Pollution Act both refer to the 3-mile territorial sea. Inconsistencies or ambiguities in geographic definitions have caused problems in civil and criminal cases unrelated to natural resources, such as the regulation of offshore gambling. Congress has amended some laws regulating marine commerce to reflect the 12-mile U.S. territorial sea. However, there has been no systematic effort to review and update all ocean-related U.S. statutes and regulations.

THE CONTIGUOUS ZONE (12 to 24 Nautical Miles)

International law recognizes a *contiguous zone* outside the territorial sea of each coastal nation. Within its contiguous zone, a nation can assert limited authority, primarily related to customs, fiscal, immigration, and sanitary laws. In 1999, President Clinton proclaimed a U.S. contiguous zone from 12 to 24 miles offshore enhancing the U.S. Coast Guard’s authority to take enforcement actions against foreign flag vessels throughout this larger area.

THE EXCLUSIVE ECONOMIC ZONE (12 to 200 Nautical Miles)

The LOS Convention allows each coastal nation to establish an *exclusive economic zone* (EEZ) adjacent to its territorial sea, extending a maximum of 200 miles seaward from the baseline. Within its EEZ, the coastal nation has sovereign rights for the purpose of exploring, exploiting, conserving, and managing living and nonliving resources, whether found in ocean waters, the seabed, or subsoil. It also has jurisdiction over artificial islands or other structures with economic purposes.

The U.S. EEZ occupies the area between 12 miles (the seaward limit of the territorial sea) and 200 miles offshore for international purposes. Consistent with international law and traditional high-seas freedoms, the U.S. does not generally assert control over surface or submarine vessel transit, aircraft overflight, or the laying of cables and pipelines on the ocean floor. The United States does not assert jurisdiction over marine scientific research in the U.S. EEZ, although the LOS Convention would allow it.

THE CONTINENTAL SHELF (12 to 200 Nautical Miles or Outer Edge of Continental Margin)

The legal concept of the continental shelf has evolved over the last sixty years. A 1945 proclamation by President Truman first asserted a U.S. claim to resources on its continental shelf. This proclamation set a precedent for other coastal nations to assert similar claims over resources far from their shores. The need to establish greater uniformity was one of the driving forces behind the 1958 United Nations Convention on the Continental Shelf. However, the 1958 Convention showed limited vision, defining the continental shelf based on a nation's ability to recover resources from the seabed. As technological capabilities improved, uncertainty began anew about the seaward boundary of a nation's exclusive rights to continental shelf resources.

The LOS Convention generally defines the *continental shelf* for purposes of international law as the seafloor and subsoil that extend beyond the territorial sea throughout the natural prolongation of a coastal nation's land mass to the outer edge of the continental margin or to 200 miles from the baseline if the continental margin does not extend that far. The legal definition of the continental shelf thus overlaps geographically with the EEZ.

Where a coastal nation can demonstrate that its continental margin extends beyond 200 miles, the LOS Convention has a complex process for asserting such claims internationally. The U.S. continental margin extends beyond 200 miles in numerous regions, including the Atlantic Coast, the Gulf of Mexico, the Bering Sea, and the Arctic Ocean. However, because the United States is not a party to the LOS Convention, it can not assert its claims through the LOS mechanism (see Chapter 29).

THE HIGH SEAS (Areas Beyond National Jurisdictions)

International law has long considered areas of the ocean beyond national jurisdiction to be the *high seas*. On the high seas, all nations have certain traditional freedoms, including the freedom of surface and submerged navigation, the freedom to fly over the water, harvest fish, lay submarine cables and pipelines, conduct scientific research, and construct artificial islands and certain other installations. These freedoms are subject to certain qualifications, such as the duty to conserve living resources and to cooperate with other nations toward this end. In addition, a nation exercising its high seas freedoms must give due regard to the interests of other nations.

Originally defined as the area beyond the territorial seas of coastal nations, today the high seas are defined by the LOS Convention as the area seaward of the EEZs of coastal nations. Sixty percent of the world's oceans remain in this zone, where the traditional freedom of the seas still prevails. Even on the high seas, the United States and other coastal nations have some limited ability to exercise governmental authority. For example, U.S. citizens on the high seas remain subject to U.S. law, as do people on U.S.-flagged vessels and aircraft.