Report 3

Reports of the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development to the Parliament of Canada

Integrated Oceans Management

Independent Auditor's Report | 2025

Office of the Auditor General of Canada

Bureau du vérificateur général du Canada

Performance audit reports

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- gather the evidence necessary to assess performance against the criteria
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At a Glance

Overall message

The Pacific, Arctic, and Atlantic oceans support a diversity of aquatic habitats, plants, and animals. The oceans also contribute over $50 billion a year to Canada's economy through industries like fisheries, shipping, and tourism. This creates a busy space where competing interests vie for access and resources. As mandated under the Oceans Act, which came into force in 1997, Fisheries and Oceans Canada is responsible for leading and facilitating the development of integrated plans to reconcile those competing interests and balance environmental conservation with the sustainable use of marine resources.

Nearly 3 decades later, Fisheries and Oceans Canada has made little progress in implementing its integrated oceans management plans. While the department worked with partners in 5 priority areas to develop integrated plans, these plans were broad and abstract and did not lead to concrete actions. This has left the country without the coordinated, pan-Canadian approach to ocean protection and management envisioned decades ago.

Between 2018 and 2024, Fisheries and Oceans Canada received $70 million to lead the development of marine spatial planning in 4 areas. This management approach is a relatively new collaborative process designed to coordinate when and where human activities should take place. Marine spatial plans build on existing integrated oceans management plans to achieve ecological, economic, cultural, and social objectives. However, the department has made little headway in developing marine spatial plans.

Given the current state of Canada's integrated oceans management approach, it is highly unlikely that the government will achieve its recent commitment under the United Nations' Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework to ensure that all of the country's marine areas are managed in an integrated and effective way by its target date of 2030.

Key facts and findings

- In 2021, 15% of people in Canada lived within 10 kilometres of the coastline, the longest coastline of any country in the world.
- Fisheries and Oceans Canada does not have the authority to regulate all ocean uses. Plans must be developed collaboratively with federal, provincial, territorial, municipal, and Indigenous governments to coordinate efforts and manage marine activities within their respective jurisdictions to meet common goals.
- We found that 3 of the 4 first-generation marine spatial plans developed since 2018 had important gaps and did not meet the 36 minimum standards established by Fisheries and Oceans Canada for such plans.

See **Recommendations and Responses** at the end of this report.

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Introduction

Background

Integrated oceans management

3.1 Canadians are affected in many ways by the Pacific, Arctic, and Atlantic oceans. Our 3 connected oceans support a diversity of habitats, plants, and animals and play a key role in our economy, culture, identity, health, and well-being. But Canada's oceans are experiencing pronounced physical and biological changes and heightened risks. As a result of climate change and human activity, water temperatures are rising, habitats are degrading, species distributions are shifting, and food webs are being transformed. These changes can lead to a cascade of ecological, social, cultural, and economic impacts.

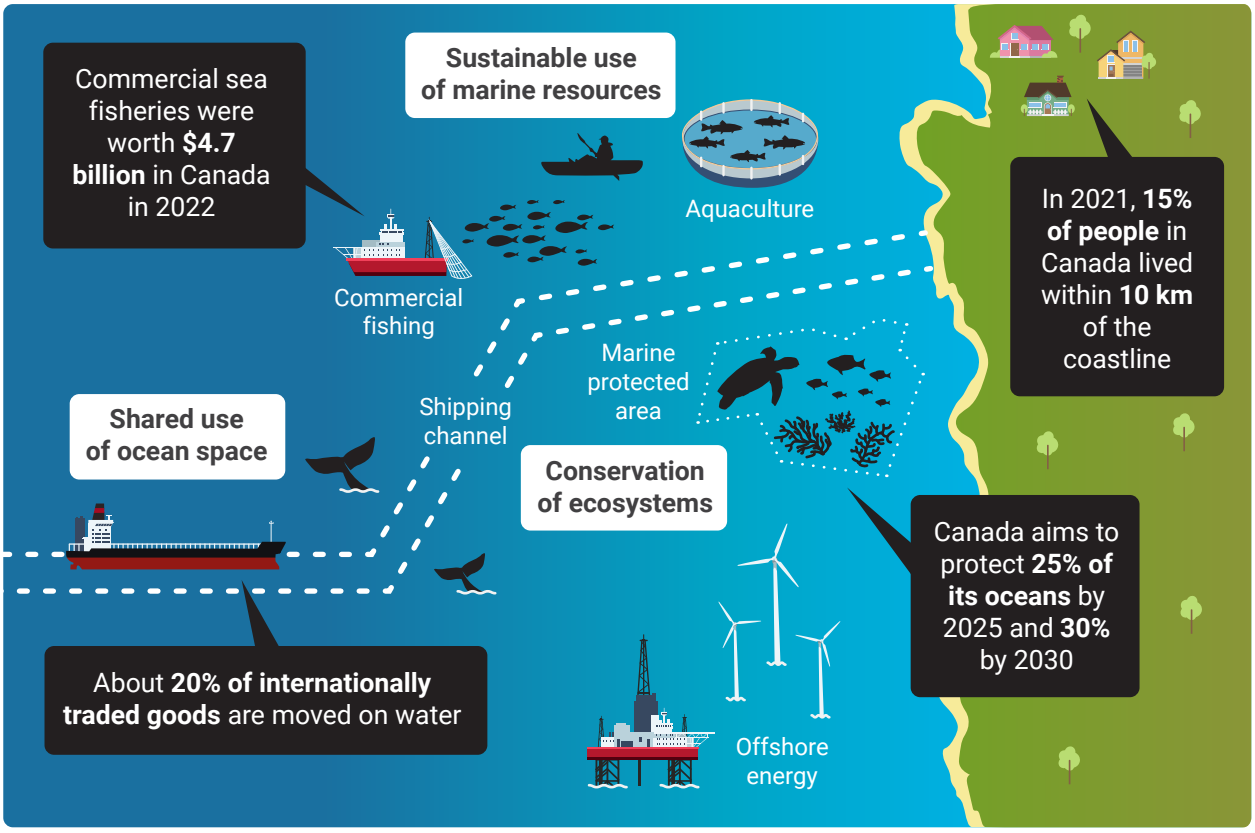
3.2 The oceans are busy spaces where various users compete for access and resources (Exhibit 3.1), and it is crucial to manage these competing interests equitably and sustainably. Issues and solutions relating to coastal and marine systems are complex and cut across multiple activity sectors and jurisdictions.

3.3 Integrated oceans management involves engaging with a broad range of parties and establishing decision-making structures to plan and manage human activities in a comprehensive manner for

- the conservation and protection of ecosystems
- sustainable economic development and use of marine resources
- the shared use of ocean spaces to minimize conflicts and promote harmonization among users

The parties involved typically include those with a decision-making role or with an interest or specific knowledge about the area to manage such as various federal departments; provincial, territorial, Indigenous governments; coastal communities, ocean industries, and academia.

Exhibit 3.1—Integrated oceans management involves balancing ocean uses while protecting marine ecosystems



Source: Based on information from Statistics Canada and Fisheries and Oceans Canada

Read the Exhibit 3.1 text description

3.4 In the recent past, the federal government has been using 2 types of plans to deliver on an integrated oceans management approach:

- integrated oceans management plans—these holistic plans involved making management decisions for the sustainable use of marine resources on the basis of shared information and institutional arrangements
- marine spatial plans—these relatively new types of plans focused on the identification of suitable areas and the allocation of ocean spaces for human activities to achieve ecological, economic, cultural, and social objectives

Roles and responsibilities

3.5 **Fisheries and Oceans Canada.** As mandated under the Oceans Act, the department is responsible for leading and facilitating the development and implementation of integrated oceans management plans in collaboration with provincial, territorial, and Indigenous governments, other federal departments and agencies, and affected interested parties. Marine spatial planning is also undertaken under the authority of this act to contribute to integrated oceans management, with Fisheries and Oceans Canada serving as the designated lead.

Focus of the audit

3.6 This audit focused on whether Fisheries and Oceans Canada effectively led and facilitated the development and implementation of an integrated oceans management approach for the conservation of ecosystems, sustainable use of marine resources, and shared use of ocean spaces.

3.7 This audit is important because integrated oceans management is needed to coordinate the activities of multiple partners to preserve the long-term health and resilience of marine ecosystems while supporting a sustainable ocean economy and managing human activities to minimize conflicts among users.

3.8 More details about the audit objective, scope, approach, and criteria are in **About the Audit** at the end of this report.

Findings

Integrated oceans management plans were not effectively implemented, which left a fragmented approach to managing shared ocean uses

Why this finding matters

3.9 This finding is important because Fisheries and Oceans Canada published integrated oceans management plans for 5 priority areas in order to move away from managing the oceans using a sectoral approach. The plans aim instead to focus on a holistic approach that balances environmental conservation with the sustainable use of marine

resources. The ultimate benefits of integrated management come when plans are put into action, and they cannot be achieved without effective implementation.

3.10 The 2005 report of the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development on Canada's oceans management strategy reported that progress to develop integrated management plans was slow, that Fisheries and Oceans fell short of meeting its commitments, and that operational guidance for effective implementation was lacking.

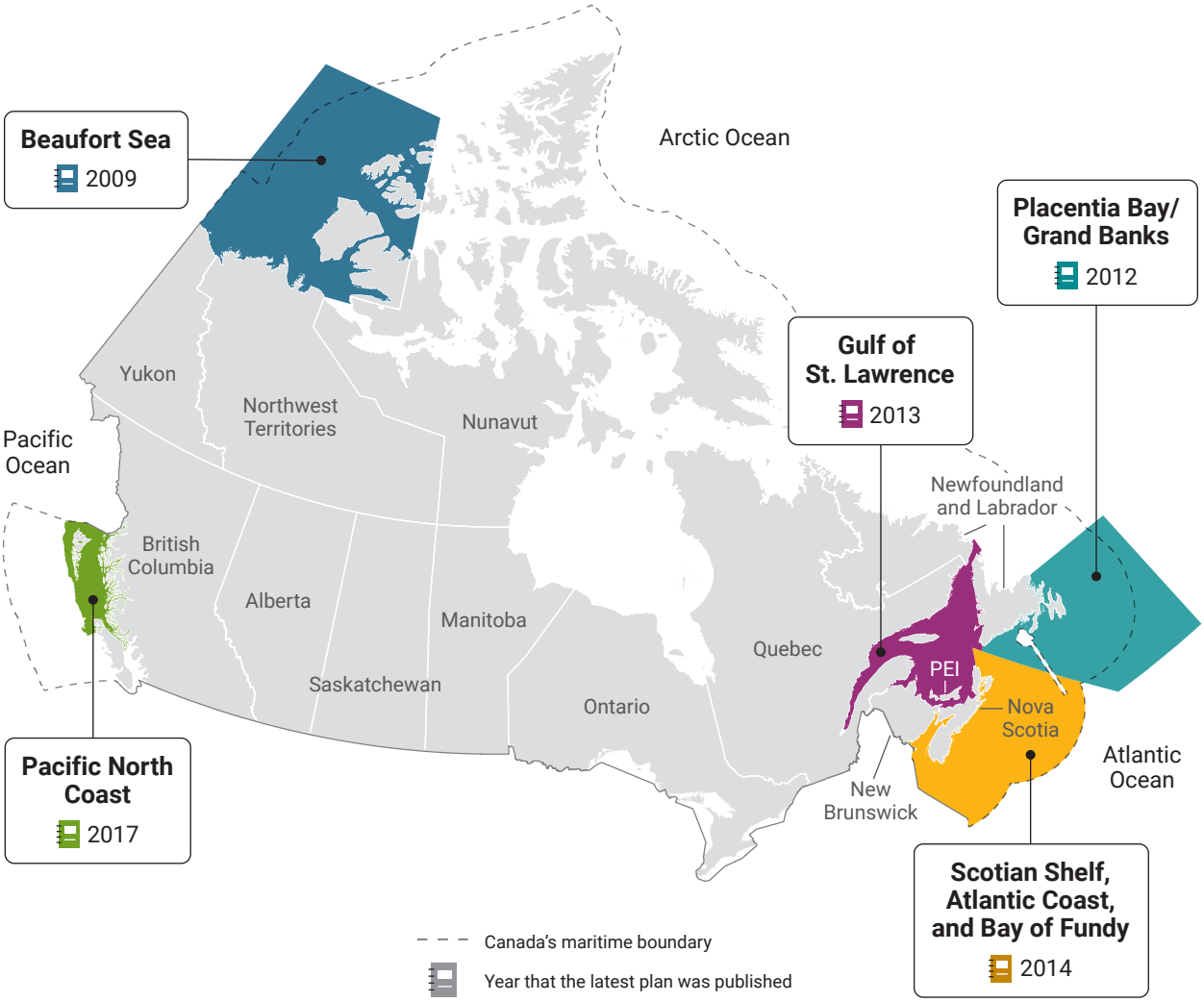
Context

3.11 The Oceans Act came into force in 1997, making Canada the first country to have comprehensive oceans management legislation. As required by the act, the government released Canada's Oceans Strategy in 2002, a policy framework for the protection and sustainable use of the marine environment. This was supported by an operational framework, also released in 2002. These documents guided the development and implementation of integrated management plans in collaboration with other parties with shared responsibility in the management of marine resources. The strategy was followed in 2005 by Canada's Oceans Action Plan, which identified 5 priority areas for integrated oceans management.

3.12 Over the years, the level of resources available to the department to support the strategy fluctuated and departmental programs changed. The latest versions of the integrated oceans management plans for the 5 priority areas were published between 2009 and 2017 (Exhibit 3.2):

- Beaufort Sea (in the Canadian Western Arctic) (2009)
- Placentia Bay/Grand Banks (east-southeast of Newfoundland) (2012)
- Gulf of St. Lawrence (2013)
- Scotian Shelf, Atlantic Coast, and Bay of Fundy (2014)
- Pacific North Coast (2017)

Exhibit 3.2—Integrated oceans management plans were developed in 5 priority areas



Source: Adapted from Fisheries and Oceans Canada

Read the Exhibit 3.2 text description

3.13 Each of these plans was meant to help different authorities work together to manage ocean spaces. The goal was to identify priorities, take real actions to protect ecosystems, use marine resources sustainably, and address conflicts over how ocean spaces are used. Fisheries and Oceans Canada, as lead and facilitator, was responsible for ensuring that the integrated management planning process was effectively completed. The 6 stages of that process are listed in Exhibit 3.3.

Lack of concrete actions to implement existing integrated oceans management plans

Findings

3.14 We found that each integrated oceans management plan defined the ocean spaces to be managed and established overarching goals, such as adopting an ecosystem approach to management and supporting collaborative management with the jurisdictions involved. Each document also provided a regional overview with a description of ecosystem features and an overview of ocean activities for the areas.

3.15 However, we found these plans to be high level and conceptual in nature, as they did not contain concrete actions to be taken either by Fisheries and Oceans Canada or by its partners. For example, we identified some gaps in the plan for Placentia Bay/Grand Banks:

- Healthy ecosystems—To meet biodiversity objectives, the plan set out to keep incidental fishing mortality of all species within acceptable levels. However, the plan did not provide any specific information on what activities needed to take place to achieve this objective, which species to prioritize, or what levels to aim for.
- Sustainable ocean use—The plan set out to assess current and potential economic opportunities and issues but failed to describe the nature of current or known issues to be addressed as a priority or state which existing or potential economic activities were considered. Also, the plan did not propose concrete actions to achieve economic well-being as intended.
- Conflict management—The plan discussed the importance of managing conflicts between ocean users, but did not describe any existing or potential conflicts and was silent about actions to be taken to prevent or mitigate conflicts.

3.16 We observed similar gaps throughout all 5 plans. In addition to lacking information about what needed to be concretely done and where, the actions presented in 4 of the 5 plans did not identify who were the responsible partners. The plans also lacked timelines for the achievement of the high-level goals. Each plan indicated that detailed action plans would be developed at a later stage and that progress would be reported on a regular basis either by the department or by established collaboration committees. These detailed action plans were meant to convert the ideas expressed in the conceptual plans into concrete results and were intended to form a key component of the implementation of the integrated plans.

3.17 We asked the department to provide any detailed action plans that had been developed since the publication of the 5 integrated oceans management plans. We found that none of the detailed action plans were

developed, except for the Beaufort Sea plan. For this region, a series of action plans was drafted, but the department admitted that they could not be implemented because of limited resources and shifting priorities.

3.18 Exhibit 3.3 provides an overview of our assessment of the department's actions in completing the integrated oceans management process for the latest versions of 5 integrated oceans management plans published between 2009 and 2017.

Exhibit 3.3—Fisheries and Oceans Canada did not ensure that the 5 integrated oceans management plans were implemented

Integrated oceans management stages	Beaufort Sea	Gulf of St. Lawrence	Pacific North Coast	Placentia Bay/ Grand Banks	Scotian Shelf, Atlantic Coast, and Bay of Fundy*
Define and assess area	!	!	✓	✓	!
Engage affected interested parties	✓	!	✓	✓	!
Develop an integrated management plan	!	!	!	!	!
Endorse the plan	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Implement the plan	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
Monitor, evaluate, report on, and revise the plan	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗

✓ Satisfactory (100% of minimum elements we expected were present)

! Partially satisfactory (at least 50% of elements we expected were present)

✗ Unsatisfactory (less than 50% of elements we expected were present)

* The 2014 Regional Oceans Plan—Scotian Shelf, Atlantic Coast, Bay of Fundy was built on a previous integrated management initiative that concluded in 2012. We did not assess the 2007 Eastern Scotian Shelf integrated ocean management plan from this earlier initiative.

Source: Based on our analysis of information from Fisheries and Oceans Canada

Read the Exhibit 3.3 text description

3.19 We asked Fisheries and Oceans Canada about root causes for the lack of progress on the integrated oceans management plans further to their release. The department attributed the slow progress mainly to the lack of dedicated funding as well as changes in government priorities, where short-term ones interfered with the long-term objectives described in integrated oceans management plans.

Fisheries and Oceans Canada's early marine spatial plans had gaps and Canada is not on track to manage all marine areas in an integrated way by 2030

Why this finding matters

3.20 This finding matters because as the department responsible for leading Canada's efforts in marine spatial planning, it is important that Fisheries and Oceans Canada ensure the effective development of spatial plans to coordinate where, when, and how humans use the ocean to benefit people, nature, and the economy, both for current and future generations.

3.21 This finding also matters because effective marine spatial plans are central to meeting marine habitat conservation objectives while supporting sustainable growth in our oceans. Additional information about the importance of this finding and benefits of marine spatial plans are described in Exhibit 3.4.

Exhibit 3.4—Marine spatial planning is central to managing ocean activities and fostering sustainable development

There has been a growing interest in developing ocean energy in Canada, with several projects underway to demonstrate its feasibility and benefits for electricity production.

Marine spatial plans could help integrate ocean-based electricity production with other ocean uses by providing ocean management scenarios that identify which areas are suitable for which activity and by allocating ocean spaces to users to determine and clarify who can do what, where, and under which conditions. When marine spatial plans are underdeveloped, they represent a missed opportunity for integrated ocean space management that can result in authorities and developers having to take some of these steps on their own, as illustrated by the following example.

In 2023, the governments of Canada, Nova Scotia, and Newfoundland and Labrador launched regional assessments to support future decisions on offshore wind projects in each province. This work was facilitated by the Impact Assessment Agency of Canada, as the lead for federal impact assessments. The 2 assessments, 1 for each province, were conducted by 2 independent committees. These committees were formed to analyze the potential environmental, health, social, and economic effects and benefits of offshore wind as a source of energy and to propose potential areas for future development.

The assessments, conducted in about 22 months, involved extensive engagement with Indigenous Peoples, other organizations, and the public and required the gathering and analysis of information on various ocean uses. While marine spatial planning efforts led by Fisheries and Oceans Canada contributed to these assessments, both committees noted that more advanced marine spatial plans would have greatly simplified their work and avoided duplication of efforts. A significant amount of the committees' time could have been saved if marine spatial plans had been more advanced.

Windmills in the ocean
Photo: Kris Wiktor/Gettyimages.ca

Context

3.22 Marine spatial planning is a relatively new process adopted by many countries to manage the oceans to achieve ecological, economic, cultural, and social objectives. Marine spatial plans are meant to identify suitable areas for human activities and to allocate ocean spaces to users to balance ecological protection with economic development while minimizing conflicts between human activities. Marine spatial planning may take various forms and may culminate in plans that are informational and advisory or legally binding. In Canada, marine spatial plans are not legally binding and do not replace or override existing jurisdictional authorities. Rather, they are meant to facilitate

collaboration among federal, provincial, territorial, municipal, and Indigenous governments to coordinate efforts and manage marine activities within their respective jurisdictions to meet common goals.

3.23 Fisheries and Oceans Canada's Marine Spatial Planning Process Blueprint provides an implementation framework to guide the advancement of marine spatial planning in the Canadian context. The blueprint is based on international principles and practices and is broadly made up of 6 phases (shown on the left side of Exhibit 3.6).

3.24 In 2018, Canada committed to delivering marine spatial plans in 4 priority areas by 2024:

- Scotian Shelf and Bay of Fundy
- Newfoundland and Labrador Shelves
- Southern British Columbia
- Pacific North Coast

Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources

Source: United Nations

3.25 Fisheries and Oceans Canada identified the development of these plans as a contribution toward the achievement of Goal 14 (Conserve and Protect Canada's Oceans) of the 2022–2026 Federal Sustainable Development Strategy and toward Goal 14 (Life Below Water) of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals. Marine spatial plans were also identified by the department as playing a central role in achieving Target 1 of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (Exhibit 3.5).

Exhibit 3.5—Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework—Target 1

In 2022, Canada adopted the United Nations' Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, which calls for urgent action to halt and reserve biodiversity loss.

Kunming–Montreal
GLOBAL BIODIVERSITY FRAMEWORK

Source: United Nations' Convention on Biological Diversity

Target 1—Plan and manage all areas to reduce biodiversity loss:

Ensure that all areas are under participatory, integrated and biodiversity inclusive spatial planning and/or effective management processes addressing land- and sea-use change, to bring the loss of areas of high biodiversity importance, including ecosystems of high ecological integrity, close to zero by 2030, while respecting the rights of indigenous peoples and local communities.

Source: Fifteenth Conference of the Parties to the United Nations' Convention on Biological Diversity, 2022

In 2024, the government released Canada's 2030 Nature Strategy to chart a path for how Canada will implement the Global Biodiversity Framework.

Unmet standards in early marine spatial plans

Findings

3.26 With a view to delivering 4 marine spatial plans by 2024, Fisheries and Oceans Canada narrowed the scope of work defined in its Marine Spatial Planning Process Blueprint down to 36 minimum standards that the department identified in its National Directive for First-Generation Marine Spatial Planning. We found that with this approach, the department committed to advancing marine spatial planning in only the first 3 phases of development defined in the blueprint. The department reported that it scaled its ambitions to the time-bound nature of the funding. We also found that the first-generation marine spatial plans left some elements of those 3 initial stages not fully completed (Exhibit 3.6).

3.27 Concretely, the resulting first-generation marine spatial plans were expected to establish and use collaboration mechanisms; describe the ecological, economic, cultural, and social context; and set a shared vision and goals for these plans. However, the first-generation approach left to an unspecified later date the development of ocean management scenarios, concrete work plans, firm commitments, and accountabilities from partners for implementation.

Exhibit 3.6—The first-generation marine spatial plans had gaps

The 6 phases of Canada's approach to marine spatial planning	What we found
1 Setting the stage: lessons learned and engagement strategy 2 Establishing governance and partnerships 3 Gathering and analyzing data	First-generation marine spatial plans were meant to advance outcomes from these 3 phases, but we found gaps: • The minimum standards established did not fully cover the expected results from these 3 phases • The first-generation plans developed did not meet all minimum standards
4 Developing marine spatial planning scenarios 5 Finalizing the plan with priorities and accountabilities	By design, the first-generation marine spatial plans developed did not reach these phases and missed important components, such as: • scenarios with suitable areas for marine activities • special measures for conservation areas • priority setting for implementation
6 Implementing the plan	Fisheries and Oceans Canada had not defined concrete steps for plan implementation. The plans by design are not legally binding and partners are expected to use existing authorities to implement them.

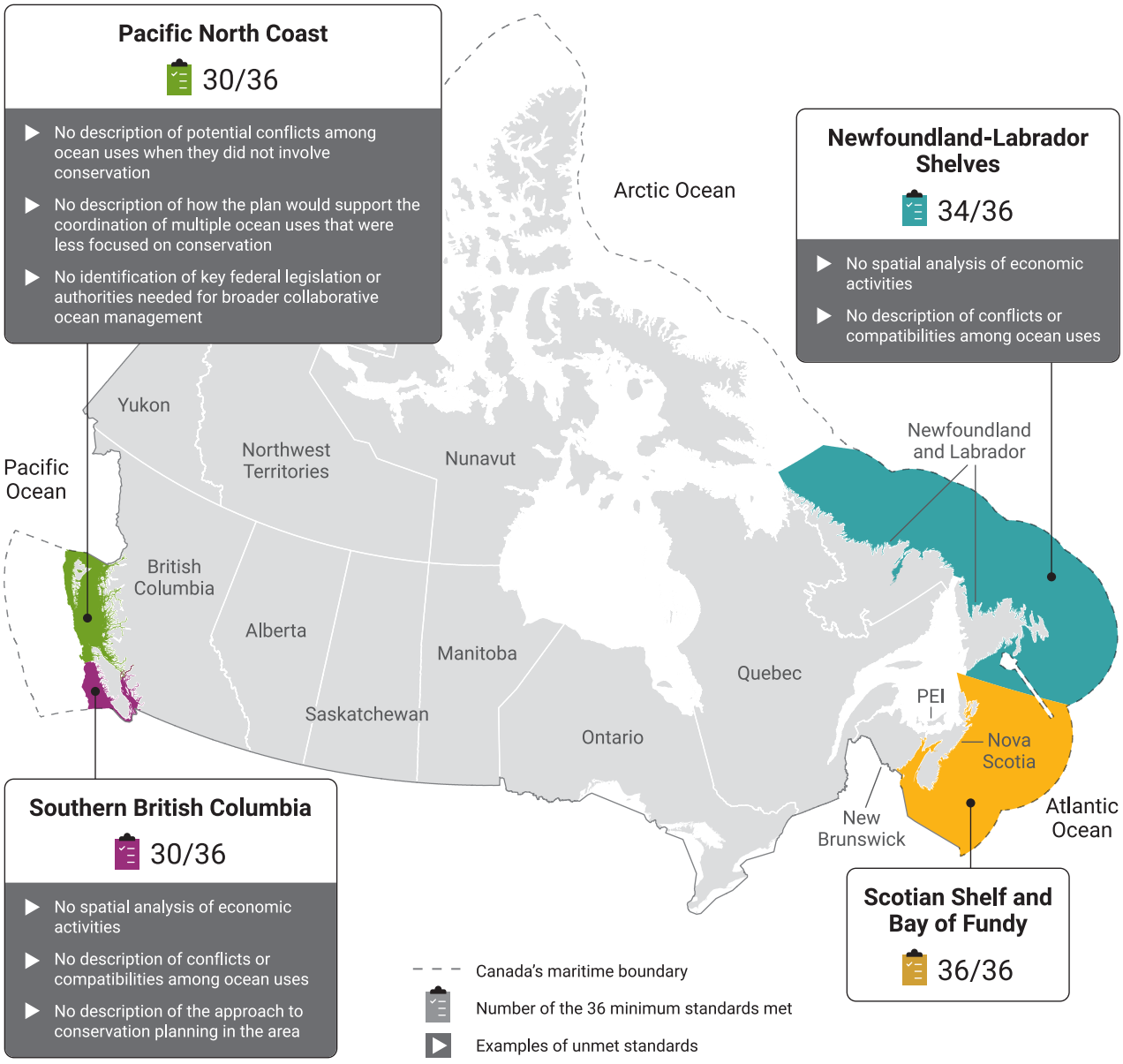
Source: Based on our analysis of information from Fisheries and Oceans Canada, including the Marine Spatial Planning Process Blueprint

Read the Exhibit 3.6 text description

3.28 Consequently, in this audit we examined whether the 4 first-generation plans that were developed in priority areas complied with the 36 minimum standards established by Fisheries and Oceans Canada for such plans. We found that for the most part, the plans met the minimum standards, but there were important gaps in cases where they did not (Exhibit 3.7).

3.29 For the Pacific North Coast plan, instead of creating new documents, the department used the ongoing work on the development of a network of marine protected areas as its contribution toward a first-generation spatial plan. This network is 1 of the priorities identified in the 2017 integrated oceans management plan for the region. A network of marine protected areas is a collection of ocean areas that are protected by laws or regulations to preserve marine life and ecosystems. These areas are set aside to limit some human activities like fishing, mining, or pollution, allowing marine species and habitats to thrive and recover. We found that the plan and associated documents provided a wealth of information on conservation objectives and measures, including some to manage known ocean activities in the areas covered by the marine protected areas. However, the plan had gaps as shown in Exhibit 3.7, which provides examples of missed minimum standards.

Exhibit 3.7—Three out of the 4 first-generation marine spatial plans did not meet all 36 minimum standards



Source: Based on our analysis of information from Fisheries and Oceans Canada

Read the Exhibit 3.7 text description

Poor tracking of spending against the dedicated funding

Findings

3.30 The audit set out to examine Fisheries and Oceans Canada's spending against the dedicated funding of $70 million from 2018–19 to 2023–24 provided for marine spatial planning. However, the department was unable to provide detailed information on its spending. Because of the multipurpose nature of some departmental activities, the department did not always distinguish between routine salaries and operational expenses and the additional costs associated with the development of marine spatial plans.

Marine spatial plans not ready for implementation

Findings

3.31 As noted previously, we found that the 5 integrated oceans management plans published by Fisheries and Oceans Canada between 2009 and 2017 were general in nature and that the department did not lead and facilitate effectively their implementation with concrete actions and ongoing monitoring of progress as committed.

3.32 We also found that the 4 first-generation marine spatial plans developed between 2018 and 2024 had gaps and were by design not ready for implementation. As illustrated in Exhibit 3.2 and Exhibit 3.7, some areas were subject to first-generation marine spatial plans, but a significant portion of Canada's territorial waters were not covered by any sort of integrated oceans management plan.

3.33 Target 1 of the 2022 Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework aims at having all marine areas managed in an integrated and effective way by 2030. Canada adopted the framework and, in 2024, charted a path for implementing it in Canada's 2030 Nature Strategy. While integrated management was already envisioned as a principle in the Oceans Act, this new target signalled heightened ambitions. However, we found that Canada was unlikely to meet this commitment because

- integrated oceans management plans in place lacked concrete actions
- marine spatial plans were in an early stage of development after 6 years of work
- the plans so far included only partial coverage of territorial waters

Recommendations

3.34 To enhance the value of the plans developed to advance integrated oceans management and effectively carry out its responsibilities under the Oceans Act, Fisheries and Oceans Canada should

- establish priorities for concrete action, in collaboration with the partners involved
- establish clear accountabilities for results, including a description of what needs to be delivered, by whom, and by when
- make this information publicly available

3.35 To demonstrate value for Canadians, Fisheries and Oceans Canada should monitor and report periodically on progress, including

- the status of marine spatial planning development
- the status of implementation efforts by the department and by the partners involved, including other federal government organizations
- the results of the evaluation of outcomes against priorities established for concrete action
- the status of departmental expenditures

See **Recommendations and Responses** at the end of this report for detailed responses.

Conclusion

3.36 We concluded that Fisheries and Oceans Canada did not effectively lead and facilitate the development and implementation of an integrated oceans management approach for the conservation of ecosystems, sustainable use of marine resources, and shared use of ocean spaces.

About the Audit

This independent assurance report was prepared by the Office of the Auditor General of Canada on integrated oceans management. Our responsibility was to provide objective information, advice, and assurance to assist Parliament in its scrutiny of the government's management of resources and programs and to conclude on whether Fisheries and Oceans Canada complied in all significant respects with the applicable criteria.

All work in this audit was performed to a reasonable level of assurance in accordance with the Canadian Standard on Assurance Engagements (CSAE) 3001—Direct Engagements, set out by the Chartered Professional Accountants of Canada (CPA Canada) in the CPA Canada Handbook—Assurance.

The Office of the Auditor General of Canada applies the Canadian Standard on Quality Management 1—Quality Management for Firms That Perform Audits or Reviews of Financial Statements, or Other Assurance or Related Services Engagements. This standard requires our office to design, implement, and operate a system of quality management, including policies or procedures regarding compliance with ethical requirements, professional standards, and applicable legal and regulatory requirements.

In conducting the audit work, we complied with the independence and other ethical requirements of the relevant rules of professional conduct applicable to the practice of public accounting in Canada, which are founded on fundamental principles of integrity, objectivity, professional competence and due care, confidentiality, and professional behaviour.

In accordance with our regular audit process, we obtained the following from entity management:

- confirmation of management's responsibility for the subject under audit
- acknowledgement of the suitability of the criteria used in the audit
- confirmation that all known information that has been requested, or that could affect the findings or audit conclusion, has been provided
- confirmation that the audit report is factually accurate

Audit objective

The objective of this audit was to determine whether Fisheries and Oceans Canada effectively led and facilitated the development and implementation of an integrated oceans management approach for the conservation of ecosystems, sustainable use of marine resources, and shared use of ocean spaces.

Scope and approach

We audited Fisheries and Oceans Canada's performance in leading and facilitating the development and implementation of an integrated oceans management approach. To achieve this, we examined the implementation of integrated oceans management plans published in the past, and we examined the recent development of marine spatial plans, where the department used

an internationally recognized approach that Canada adopted for delivering on integrated oceans management. The audit set out to determine whether the department effectively delivered on these responsibilities by examining whether this work resulted in the following:

- The implementation of 5 integrated oceans management plans that were put in place between 2009 and 2017, with a focus on progress made toward the achievement of the following key integrated oceans management objectives: meeting ecosystem conservation objectives, ensuring the sustainable use of ocean resources, and managing the shared use of ocean spaces by minimizing conflicts among users.
- The advancement of marine spatial planning with a focus on the delivery of 4 plans that the department had committed to developing between 2018 and 2024. We examined the compliance of the resulting plans with applicable policy requirements, including how they set out to achieve the same 3 key integrated oceans management objectives defined for the previous plans that also apply to marine spatial planning.

To assess the implementation of integrated oceans management plans in place, we first examined whether the plans as published by Fisheries and Oceans Canada were in compliance with the Policy and Operational Framework for Integrated Management of Estuarine, Coastal and Marine Environments in Canada, with a focus on whether they contained clear priorities and actions for implementation. We then examined whether the actions identified in the plans, or additional ones developed since their publication, were scheduled for implementation and effectively implemented over the period covered by the audit. We also audited whether Fisheries and Oceans Canada had led and facilitated the monitoring and reporting of progress.

We assessed the implementation of the following integrated management plans developed for 5 priority areas:

- Integrated Ocean Management Plan for the Beaufort Sea: 2009 and Beyond (2009)
- Placentia Bay / Grand Banks Large Ocean Management Area: Integrated Management Plan (2012)
- Regional Oceans Plan—Scotian Shelf, Atlantic Coast, Bay of Fundy (2014)

  This plan was built on a previous integrated management initiative that concluded in 2012. We did not assess the 2007 Eastern Scotian Shelf integrated ocean management plan from this initiative.
- Gulf of St. Lawrence Integrated Management Plan (2013)
- Pacific North Coast Integrated Management Area Plan (2017)

By design, integrated oceans management plans were meant to be developed and implemented by Fisheries and Oceans Canada as lead and facilitator, in collaboration with partners identified in each plan. Partners typically included other federal departments and agencies and provincial, territorial, and Indigenous governments. The audit did not set out to assess the performance of partners outside of the federal government but focused on whether Fisheries and Oceans Canada, in its role as lead and facilitator, had arranged for progress monitoring and reporting to occur, in collaboration with these partners.

To assess the development of marine spatial plans, the audit examined how the department used the marine spatial planning approach as a process to achieve integrated oceans management. The audit examined the recent development of marine spatial planning in accordance with domestic and

international commitments and in compliance with applicable policies and directives, including the Marine Spatial Planning Process Blueprint and the National Directive for First-Generation Marine Spatial Planning. The audit focused on Fisheries and Oceans Canada's commitments to deliver first-generation marine spatial plans in 4 priority areas by 2024. In particular, we assessed whether the following 4 first-generation marine spatial plans developed between 2018 and 2024 met the 36 minimum standards set out in the National Directive for First-Generation Marine Spatial Planning:

- Scotian Shelf and Bay of Fundy
- Newfoundland and Labrador Shelves
- Southern British Columbia
- Pacific North Coast

The audit did not assess the implementation of these plans because by design they had not yet reached this stage. However, it is worth noting that marine spatial plans were meant to build on previous integrated oceans management plans, as applicable, rather than replacing them and that as such, the older plans were still in effect and relevant for implementation.

Some of the expected deliverables related to marine spatial planning—such as the Canada Marine Planning Atlas—were out of scope, as the audit focused on the delivery of the first-generation marine spatial plans.

The audit also assessed whether Fisheries and Oceans Canada, through its work on integrated oceans management, made progress toward Canada's international commitment of achieving Target 1 of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, which aims to manage all marine areas through spatial planning or other effective and integrated approaches by 2030. The audit also examined Fisheries and Oceans Canada's contributions to Goal 14 of the 2022–2026 Federal Sustainable Development Strategy, which coincides with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 14 (Life Below Water) and focuses on conserving and protecting Canada's oceans under the broader theme of ocean protection and conservation. This was done through the assessment of progress made on marine spatial plans, identified by the department as central to the achievement of Target 1 of the framework and contributing to Goal 14 of the federal sustainable development strategy. The department conducts other activities related to Goal 14, including work related to marine protected areas, which we did not examine as part of this audit. A separate audit was planned to examine federal government progress on marine protected areas.

The audit approach primarily involved collecting information and data through document reviews and interviews. We interviewed key officials from both the national headquarters and regional offices of Fisheries and Oceans Canada involved in integrated oceans management and marine spatial planning. Our analysis included reviewing integrated management plans, first-generation marine spatial plans, and internal departmental documents, such as budget and spending records.

To inform our work and assess and illustrate the potential outcomes and importance of integrated oceans management, the audit also gathered insights from other federal departments and subject matter experts. For instance, we interviewed and obtained information from officials at the Impact Assessment Agency of Canada and from committee members of the Regional Assessment of Offshore Wind Development in Nova Scotia and Newfoundland and Labrador. The audit did not assess the performance of these third parties but validated with them the statements of the audit report concerning them.

Criteria

We used the following criteria to conclude against our audit objective:

Criteria	Sources
Fisheries and Oceans Canada effectively led and facilitated the implementation of integrated oceans management plans put in place between 2009 and 2017 for the conservation of ecosystems, sustainable use of marine resources, and shared use of ocean spaces.	• Oceans Act • Canada's Oceans Strategy, Fisheries and Oceans Canada, 2002 • Canada's Oceans Action Plan, Fisheries and Oceans Canada, 2005 • Policy and Operational Framework for Integrated Management of Estuarine, Coastal and Marine Environments in Canada, Fisheries and Oceans Canada, 2002 • Policy on Results, Treasury Board, 2016 • Directive on Results, Treasury Board, 2016 • Policy on Management, Resources and Results Structures [2010–2016] • Departmental management action plans (various), Fisheries and Oceans Canada • Integrated Ocean Management Plan for the Beaufort Sea: 2009 and Beyond, Beaufort Sea Partnership, 2009 • Placentia Bay / Grand Banks Large Ocean Management Area: Integrated Management Plan, Fisheries and Oceans Canada, 2012 • Regional Oceans Plan—Scotian Shelf, Atlantic Coast, Bay of Fundy, Fisheries and Oceans Canada, 2014 • Gulf of St. Lawrence Integrated Management Plan, Fisheries and Oceans Canada, 2013 • Pacific North Coast Integrated Management Area Plan, Pacific North Coast Integrated Management Area (PNCIMA) Initiative, 2017

Criteria	Sources
Fisheries and Oceans Canada effectively led and facilitated the advancement of marine spatial planning as a way to achieve integrated oceans management, in accordance with domestic and international commitments and in compliance with applicable policies, directives, and processes.	• Oceans Act • 2019–20 to 2024–25 departmental plans, Fisheries and Oceans Canada • National Directive for First-Generation Marine Spatial Planning, Fisheries and Oceans Canada, 2023 • National Guidance for Marine Spatial Planning, Fisheries and Oceans Canada, 2024 • The Marine Spatial Planning Process Blueprint, Fisheries and Oceans Canada • Marine Spatial Planning: A Step-by-Step Approach Toward Ecosystem-Based Management; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission (IOC), 2009 • Marine Spatial Planning Global International Guide on Marine/Maritime Spatial Planning, UNESCO IOC and European Commission, 2021 • 2023–2027 Departmental Sustainable Development Strategy, Fisheries and Oceans Canada • Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, Convention on Biological Diversity, United Nations, 2022 • Canada's 2030 Nature Strategy: Halting and Reversing Biodiversity Loss in Canada, Environment and Climate Change Canada, 2024 • Departmental management action plans (various), Fisheries and Oceans Canada

Period covered by the audit

The period covered by this audit is from 1 April 2018 to 30 September 2024. This is the period to which the audit conclusion applies. However, to gain a more complete understanding of the subject matter of the audit, we also examined certain matters that preceded the start date of this period. In particular, when examining the implementation of the integrated management plans put in place between 2009 and 2017, we considered relevant results and activities that occurred from the release of each plan to the end of the audit period.

Date of the report

We obtained sufficient and appropriate audit evidence on which to base our conclusion on 29 May 2025, in Ottawa, Canada.

Audit team

This audit was completed by a multidisciplinary team from across the Office of the Auditor General of Canada led by Susie Fortier, Acting Principal. The principal has overall responsibility for audit quality, including conducting the audit in accordance with professional standards, applicable legal and regulatory requirements, and the office's policies and system of quality management.

Recommendations and Responses

Responses appear as they were received by the Office of the Auditor General of Canada.

In the following table, the paragraph number preceding the recommendation indicates the location of the recommendation in the report.

Recommendation	Response
3.34 To enhance the value of the plans developed to advance integrated oceans management and effectively carry out its responsibilities under the Oceans Act, Fisheries and Oceans Canada should • establish priorities for concrete action, in collaboration with the partners involved • establish clear accountabilities for results, including a description of what needs to be delivered, by whom, and by when • make this information publicly available	**The department's response.** Agreed. Marine spatial planning is one of several approaches to support Canada's efforts towards Target 1 of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework along with other effective management processes as indicated and further defined in the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity guidance. The Blue Economy Regulatory Roadmap commits to developing a policy statement on MSP as an approach to integrated oceans management and, in the longer term, collaborate with federal departments and agencies with marine mandates to create a comprehensive whole-of-government policy statement / guidance. Four first-generation marine spatial plans are publicly available to support public, private and government decision making on how to plan their activities and use those ocean spaces in a way that responds to ecosystem, social and economic considerations. In addition, Fisheries and Oceans Canada will continue to collect and analyze data and information, and to engage with partners and stakeholders in support of sound regulatory decision-making. This foundational work will continue to support future opportunities to advance integrated oceans management.
3.35 To demonstrate value for Canadians, Fisheries and Oceans Canada should monitor and report periodically on progress, including • the status of marine spatial planning development • the status of implementation efforts by the department and by the partners involved, including other federal government organizations • the results of the evaluation of outcomes against priorities established for concrete action • the status of departmental expenditures	**The department's response.** Agreed. DFO will assess its existing monitoring and reporting efforts to determine how best to align these efforts to allow for the value of marine spatial planning efforts to be assessed. DFO will contribute to reporting towards Target 1 of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework as part of periodic reporting requirements.

Appendix—Text Descriptions of Exhibits

Exhibit 3.1—Integrated oceans management involves balancing ocean uses while protecting marine ecosystems—Text description

This illustration shows that ocean spaces are busy. It shows how spaces are managed in the ocean for commercial, recreational, and environmental uses, and it gives statistics on commercial and environmental activities.

Following are the commercial activities shown:

- Commercial fishing—This activity is shown as a boat with a net cast into the ocean.
- Shipping channel—This activity is shown as a ship making its way through the dedicated channel.
- Aquaculture—This activity is shown as a fish pond for raising fish.
- Offshore energy—This activity is shown as windmills in the ocean and an oil platform supporting rigs and equipment.

Following are the environmental activities shown:

- Shared use of ocean space—Shipping and fishing vessels share ocean space with marine life, people doing recreational activities like kayaking, aquaculture ponds, marine protected areas, and offshore energy exploration and production.
- Sustainable use of marine resources—Commercial fishing and aquaculture ponds use marine resources in a sustainable way.
- Conservation of ecosystems—Marine protected areas conserve ecosystems from commercial and recreational fishing and other activities.

Following are commercial and environmental statistics:

- Commercial sea fisheries were worth $4.7 billion in Canada in 2022.
- About 20% of internationally traded goods are moved on water.
- In 2021, 15% of people in Canada lived within 10 kilometres of the coastline.
- Canada aims to protect 25% of its oceans by 2025 and 30% by 2030.

Source: Based on information from Statistics Canada and Fisheries and Oceans Canada

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Exhibit 3.2—Integrated management plans were developed in 5 priority areas—Text description

This map of Canada highlights 5 marine areas in the northern, western, and eastern waters of Canada. It also shows the year that the latest integrated management plans were published.

The 5 marine areas and publication years of integrated management plans are as follows:

- the Beaufort Sea—the latest integrated management plan was published in 2009
- the Pacific North Coast—the latest integrated management plan was published in 2017
- Placentia Bay and the Grand Banks—the latest integrated management plan was published in 2012
- the Gulf of St. Lawrence—the latest integrated management plan was published in 2013
- the Scotian Shelf, Atlantic Coast, and Bay of Fundy—the latest integrated management plan was published in 2014

Source: Adapted from Fisheries and Oceans Canada

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Exhibit 3.3—Fisheries and Oceans Canada did not ensure that the 5 integrated oceans management plans were implemented—Text description

This chart shows 6 stages of integrated oceans management and whether each stage was satisfactory, partially satisfactory, or unsatisfactory for the 5 priority marine areas. The first 4 stages, from defining and assessing the area to endorsing the plan, were either satisfactory or partially satisfactory, and the last 2 stages about implementing the plan and monitoring, evaluating, reporting on, and revising the plan were unsatisfactory. Satisfactory means that 100% of the minimum elements we expected were present. Partially satisfactory means that at least 50% of the elements we expected were present. Unsatisfactory means that less than 50% of the elements we expected were present.

The first stage of integrated oceans management consists of defining and assessing the area. This stage was satisfactory for 2 priority marine areas, namely for the Pacific North Coast and for Placentia Bay and the Grand Banks. It was partially satisfactory for the other 3 priority areas—that is, for the Beaufort Sea; for the Gulf of St. Lawrence; and for the Scotian Shelf, Atlantic Coast, and Bay of Fundy. There is a note about the plan for this last priority area.

The second stage of integrated oceans management consists of engaging affected interested parties. This stage was satisfactory for the 3 priority areas: for the Beaufort Sea, for the Pacific North Coast, and for Placentia Bay and the Grand Banks. It was partially satisfactory for 2 priority areas: for the Gulf of St. Lawrence and for the Scotian Shelf, Atlantic Coast, and Bay of Fundy.

The third stage of integrated oceans management consists of developing an integrated management plan. This stage was partially satisfactory for all 5 priority marine areas.

The fourth stage of integrated oceans management consists of endorsing the plan. This stage was satisfactory for all 5 priority marine areas.

The fifth stage of integrated oceans management consists of implementing the plan. This stage was unsatisfactory for all 5 priority marine areas.

The sixth stage of integrated oceans management consists of monitoring, evaluating, reporting on, and revising the plan. This stage was unsatisfactory for all 5 priority marine areas.

Regarding the integrated oceans management plan for the Scotian Shelf, Atlantic Coast, and Bay of Fundy, note that the 2014 Regional Oceans Plan—Scotian Shelf, Atlantic Coast, Bay of Fundy was built on a previous integrated management initiative that concluded in 2012. We did not assess the 2007 Eastern Scotian Shelf integrated ocean management plan from this earlier initiative.

Source: Based on our analysis of information from Fisheries and Oceans Canada

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Exhibit 3.6—The first-generation marine spatial plans had gaps—Text description

This chart shows the 6 phases of Canada's approach to marine spatial planning and our findings for each phase after having examined the first-generation marine spatial plans. Overall, there were gaps in the first 3 phases, and the plans did not reach the last 3 phases of marine spatial planning.

The first 3 phases of Canada's approach to marine spatial planning are as follows:

- Phase 1—Setting the stage: lessons learned and engagement strategy
- Phase 2—Establishing governance and partnerships
- Phase 3—Gathering and analyzing data

Our findings. First-generation marine spatial plans were meant to advance outcomes from these 3 phases, but we found gaps:

- The minimum standards established did not fully cover the expected results from these 3 phases
- The first-generation plans developed did not meet all minimum standards

Phases 4 and 5 of Canada's approach to marine spatial planning are as follows:

- Phase 4—Developing marine spatial planning scenarios
- Phase 5—Finalizing the plan with priorities and accountabilities

Our findings. By design, the first-generation marine spatial plans developed did not reach phases 4 and 5 and missed important components, such as:

- scenarios with suitable areas for marine activities
- special measures for conservation areas
- priority setting for implementation

Phase 6 of Canada's approach to marine spatial planning is as follows: Implementing the plan.

Our findings. Fisheries and Oceans Canada had not defined concrete steps for plan implementation. The plans by design are not legally binding and partners are expected to use existing authorities to implement them.

Source: Based on our analysis of information from Fisheries and Oceans Canada, including the Marine Spatial Planning Process Blueprint

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Exhibit 3.7—Three out of the 4 first-generation marine spatial plans did not meet all 36 minimum standards—Text description

This map of Canada highlights 4 marine areas in the western and eastern waters of Canada. It also shows the results of our analysis of the 4 first-generation marine spatial plans—that is, how many of the 36 minimum standards were met for each of the plans and examples of the unmet standards. Overall, the number of minimum standards that were met ranged from 30 out of 36 to 36 out of 36. Following are the details for each of the 4 plans:

Marine spatial plan for the Pacific North Coast—30 out of 36 minimum standards were met. Examples of unmet standards were as follows:

- No description of potential conflicts among ocean uses when they did not involve conservation
- No description of how the plan would support the coordination of multiple ocean uses that were less focused on conservation
- No identification of key federal legislation or authorities needed for broader collaborative ocean management

Marine spatial plan for the Southern British Columbia—30 out of 36 minimum standards were met. Examples of unmet standards were as follows:

- No spatial analysis of economic activities
- No description of conflicts or compatibilities among ocean uses
- No description of the approach to conservation planning in the area

Marine spatial plan for the Newfoundland and Labrador Shelves—34 out of 36 minimum standards were met. Examples of unmet standards were as follows:

- No spatial analysis of economic activities
- No description of conflicts or compatibilities among ocean uses

Marine spatial plan for the Scotian Shelf and Bay of Fundy—36 out of 36 minimum standards were met.

Source: Based on our analysis of information from Fisheries and Oceans Canada

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