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Our country is ready for stronger stewardship of oceans

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In the face of the biggest oil spill in U.S. history in the Gulf of Mexico, our nation, more than ever, recognizes the importance of the ocean to our economy and our way of life. It is crystal clear that taking risks with

the health of the ocean can result in dire consequences.

At Taylor Shellfish Farms near Shelton, our business relies

on healthy ocean waters, and we are saddened by the human and environmental tragedy in the Gulf of Mexico.

At Taylor, we have a long history in this state of responsibly farming shellfish and advocating for strong ocean protections. But I believe we must do more to plan for future uses of our ocean and to safeguard our shared ocean resource for the benefit of all.

If we are to feed our country, we will need more companies like ours that can safely farm seafood as a basic source of

healthy protein. Currently 80 percent of our country's seafood is imported; but more of it can be farmed at home, which creates local jobs and reduces our reliance on seafood imported from far away places. To do so, there must be adequate planning to ensure aquaculture doesn't negatively impact the ocean and is thoughtfully integrated into the fabric of our coastal communities and seascapes.

New efforts both in Washington, D.C., and here at home can help us do this.

Since the oil spill, great progress has been made for the ocean. The Obama administration has taken an important step in making ocean stewardship a national priority. On July 1, President Barack Obama signed an executive order charting the course for a new way to manage our ocean resources, and to plan for how we use the ocean in the future. Coastal and marine spatial planning, as it is called, will help make our ocean cleaner, safer and more productive for businesses such as ours.

How does it work?

Coastal and marine spatial

planning removes the guesswork from placing new facilities – and working around existing ones – in U.S. waters by taking a big-picture view of an ocean region and planning ahead for how we use the space.

Much like we need smart planning on land to reduce conflicts and protect special places like parks, coastal and marine spatial planning can do the same in the ocean.

For instance, shellfish need clean water to thrive. But shellfish in the ocean can be impacted by sources of pollution from development along the shoreline. The cumulative effects of this pollution in the ocean can wipe out the harvest from a shellfish farm located nearby. Careful preparation with coastal and marine spatial planning can help avoid these types of conflicts.

Washington state passed marine spatial planning legislation earlier this year. Under our new law, Washington will comprehensively plan for the multiple uses of shoreline and aquatic lands including aquaculture, fishing, shipping, recreation and potential

renewable energy facilities – in state waters which extend out to three miles off the coast.

It's critical that under Obama's executive order, state and federal planning authorities, as well as ocean users, all work together to ensure planning is integrated. Ocean water and ecosystems know no boundaries, not even ones set by people with the best of intentions.

The ocean is important to each and every one of us. It provides us

with much of the air we breathe, the food we eat and it regulates our climate. As a business whose success depends on a healthy ocean, we urge Congress to pass legislation that provides for dedicated funding for coastal and marine spatial planning. It is time to step up to our responsibility to protect our ocean resource – our economy relies on it.

Bill Dewey is director of Public Policy and Communications for Taylor Shellfish Farms near Shelton.