Urban Ocean Lab (UOL)’s 2023 policy priorities are informed by the latest climate science and current policy landscape, and are grounded in the principles of ocean justice.

The latest report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) states that “there is a rapidly closing window of opportunity to secure a liveable and sustainable future for all”. As climate risks increase globally, so do the threats to the 65 million people who live in U.S. coastal cities. Hurricanes, sea level rise, and extreme rainfall are already affecting U.S. coasts, with metropolitan areas being hit hardest. Sea levels are projected to rise an average of 10–12 inches by 2030 and potentially 3.5–7 feet by the end of the century. Despite being one of the critical global systems that can accelerate climate action, cities face a widening coastal adaptation gap and remain unprepared for increasing climate risks.

The science is clear—urgent action (and federal support) is needed in U.S. coastal cities. President Biden has signed into law a collection of historic climate policies creating unprecedented opportunities for climate action at the local level. The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL), the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), and Justice40 (J40) will direct billions of dollars to coastal resilience and environmental justice projects. The development of the first-ever, whole-of-government Ocean Climate Action Plan sets the stage for coastal cities to help catalyze transformative ocean-climate action.

Coastal cities can lead the way in advancing climate and ocean policy solutions, at a time of urgent need and unparalleled opportunity. To help coastal cities meet the moment, this year UOL will release a “Blue New Deal” ocean-climate policy framework and supporting resources for more climate-ready coastal cities.

A ‘BLUE NEW DEAL’ FOR COASTAL CITIES

Drawing on case studies of coastal cities around the world, a Blue New Deal framework will include model policies for more climate-ready U.S. coastal cities. It will focus on key thematic areas, including:

- **Protecting and restoring coastal ecosystems** to provide natural shoreline protection, improve ecosystem function and health, enhance food security, and support coastal economies, all while absorbing tons of carbon.
- **Prioritizing pre-disaster planning and adaptation** by adopting policies and practices to discourage development in hazardous areas and shifting resources toward pre-disaster mitigation and equitable climate-driven relocation.
- **Scaling offshore renewable energy**—such as wind, solar, wave, and tidal—to provide large-scale renewable energy to coastal cities, while creating good jobs and supporting a just transition.
- **Adapting and building resilient coastal infrastructure** and shifting infrastructure inland, to withstand the impacts of climate change and support healthier communities and ecosystems.
- **Strengthening social cohesion** as a climate strategy by investing in community-based and community-led solutions—so that people are prepared for climate impacts and can activate locally to recover from them.
- **Supporting the blue economy and workforce** to ensure ocean-climate action and investments in climate resilience also create economic opportunities and good and accessible jobs.
- **Increasing access to funding and developing innovative financing** for climate resilience and adaptation, to ensure coastal cities have the necessary resources to implement solutions.

The Blue New Deal policy framework will include key actions coastal cities can take within each of these thematic areas. The recommendations will be widely applicable to a broad range of U.S. coastal cities, which vary dramatically in size, population, demographics, and climate vulnerability.
ADDITIONAL POLICY INITIATIVES

In parallel to developing a broad Blue New Deal policy framework, in 2023 UOL will also develop specific policy recommendations in four areas: regenerative ocean farming; climate-driven relocation; nature-based solutions; and offshore wind. These policy ‘deep dive’ areas were selected for their applicability to coastal cities across multiple Blue New Deal themes, and because of the opportunity for policy change due to increased levels of interest, activity, political will, and resources for implementation. This year, UOL will work with policy makers, communities, and practitioners (scientists, designers, researchers, and more) to:

- **Develop and promote policies that support regenerative ocean farming.** Greenhouse gas emissions have drastically altered ocean conditions, causing ocean temperatures to increase, acidity to rise, and oxygen levels to decrease, impacting coastal ecosystems and economies. Consumption of domestic seafood continues to grow—and the U.S. imports 70-85% of seafood, almost half of which is produced via unsustainable methods. Regenerative ocean farming has the potential to increase the domestic supply of seaweed and shellfish while protecting shorelines, improving water quality, mitigating ocean acidification locally, and increasing species biodiversity. In Q1 2023, UOL released a set of policy recommendations for responsibly growing the regenerative ocean farming industry in the U.S., and we will work with stakeholders across the industry to support their adoption.

- **Develop justice-centered policies for climate-driven relocation in U.S. coastal cities.** Sea level rise alone threatens to displace anywhere between 4.2 to 13.1 million people living in the U.S. by 2100. In coastal cities—due to their high population density, concentration of infrastructure and economic activity, and increasing vulnerability to climate risks—climate-driven relocation is becoming an increasingly critical adaptation pathway. However, discriminatory housing policies, inequitable development, and uneven flood protection patterns make equitable and pre-emptive relocation more challenging to achieve. This year, UOL will bring together city governments, community organizations, and nonprofits through a ‘Knowledge-to-Action Network’ to explore innovative and justice-centered policy solutions to climate-driven relocation in coastal cities.

- **Explore policy that supports nature-based solutions for climate adaptation in coastal cities.** Natural infrastructure, such as coastal wetlands and living shorelines, are a cost-effective tool for advancing the climate resilience of coastal cities and communities—mitigating the dual impacts of climate change and urbanization. Despite their benefits, nature-based solutions receive less than 0.3% of urban infrastructure spending—and the majority of spending is directed towards mitigation, representing a missed opportunity for climate preparedness. Recent federal actions, including the BIL, IRA, and J40 offer significant funding for nature-based solutions, and policymakers need to ensure adequate spending on adaptation. This year, UOL will explore policy that supports the use of nature-based solutions for climate adaptation in coastal cities, leveraging federal spending.

- **Research policy to support justly-sourced offshore wind.** Cities consume over two-thirds of the world’s energy and are responsible for 70% of global carbon emissions. Cities need access to large-scale renewable energy, but have limited space for new energy development, relative to the scale required. Offshore wind has the potential to provide massive benefits for coastal cities. The Biden Administration’s goal of producing 30 gigawatts of offshore wind by 2030 has led to rapid growth of the industry. Policymakers have a responsibility to ensure historically underserved coastal communities benefit from the clean energy transition, and that offshore wind development is responsibly sited, responsibly operated, and prioritizes family-sustaining jobs for adjacent communities. This year, UOL will identify policy opportunities to advance the industry, with ocean justice in mind.