



NAVIGATING U.S. MARITIME BOUNDARIES: FROM COASTLINES TO THE HIGH SEAS

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Introduction

The United States, with one of the longest coastlines in the world, exercises jurisdiction over vast maritime areas critical for economic, environmental, and national security interests. Maritime zones such as territorial seas, contiguous zones, and Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs)—are governed by both international law and domestic legislation, with enforcement and resource rights differing from state to state. This article explores the legal frameworks, state-by-state distinctions, and implications of maritime boundaries across the Atlantic, Pacific, and Arctic Oceans.

Understanding U.S. Maritime Zones

The maritime limits and boundaries of the United States are measured from an official baseline typically the low-water line marked on NOAA nautical charts. These zones are defined under international law, particularly the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), and domestic laws like the Submerged Lands Act of 1953.

Key Maritime Zones

- **Territorial Sea (12 nautical miles):** States exercise full sovereignty, similar to land territory.
- **Contiguous Zone (24 nautical miles):** States can enforce laws related to immigration, customs, and pollution.
- **Exclusive Economic Zone (200 nautical miles):** The U.S. holds sovereign rights for resource exploration and exploitation.
- **International Waters (beyond 200 NM):** Governed by international law; no single state has control.

I. Maritime Boundaries: Atlantic Ocean States

Eastern U.S. coastal states manage important economic activities, including commercial fishing, shipping, and environmental conservation. Their maritime limits extend up to 200 nautical miles, though interstate and international EEZ overlaps require diplomacy and regulatory cooperation.

State	EEZ	Territorial Sea	Contiguous Zone	International Waters	Notable Features	Borders
Maine	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Shares EEZ with Canada; fishing agreements vital.	Canada, New Hampshire
New Hampshire	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Short coastline; cooperative management.	Maine

Massachusetts	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	High-volume fishing/shipping.	Rhode Island, NY
Rhode Island	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Compact EEZ; critical coordination.	Connecticut
Connecticut	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Access via Long Island Sound.	NY
New York	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Major port and maritime hub.	NJ, CT
New Jersey	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Dense port traffic; border disputes.	NY
Delaware	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Short coastline, big responsibility.	MD, NJ
Maryland	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Chesapeake Bay management.	VA
Virginia	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Norfolk naval base; fisheries.	MD
North Carolina	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Diverse marine life; regional cooperation.	SC
South Carolina	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Rich coastal biodiversity.	GA
Georgia	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	EEZ access into the Atlantic.	FL
Florida	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Longest coastline; EEZ conflicts.	AL
Alabama	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Strategic Gulf entry.	MS, FL
Mississippi	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	EEZ overlaps with neighbors.	LA
Louisiana	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Offshore energy exploration.	TX
Texas	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Extended EEZ due to state-specific laws.	LA

II. Pacific Ocean States and Territories

The Pacific region is defined by biodiversity, global trade routes, and unique

geopolitical roles. Several U.S. territories here are crucial for both military strategy and resource exploitation.

State/Territory	EEZ	Territorial Sea	Contiguous Zone	International Waters	Highlights
Alaska	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Largest U.S. EEZ; fisheries, oil.
Washington	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Salmon industry; Canada agreements.
Oregon	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Strong fishing sector.
California	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Environmental regulation leadership.
Hawaii	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Vast EEZ; ocean-centric culture.
Guam	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Military presence; fisheries.
American Samoa	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Regional fishery heritage.
Northern Mariana Islands	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	EEZ critical for security.
Puerto Rico	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Caribbean EEZ with ecological value.

III. Arctic Ocean Jurisdictions

Only **Alaska** provides the U.S. with Arctic Ocean access. The region is increasingly

significant for energy exploration, indigenous rights, and climate research.

Region	EEZ	Territorial Sea	Contiguous Zone	Notes
Alaska	Yes	Yes	Yes	Fisheries, oil reserves, Arctic research.
North Slope Borough	Yes	Yes	Yes	Indigenous resource rights.
Arctic National Wildlife Refuge	N/A	Yes	Yes	Environmental conservation area.

IV. Legal Foundations of Maritime Boundaries

A. The Submerged Lands Act (1953)

- Grants coastal states control over resources within 3 nautical miles from the coastline.

- Exceptions: Texas and Florida, granted up to 3 marine leagues (~9.5 NM) in the Gulf of Mexico.

B. Congressional Grants

- States entering the Union without maritime boundaries required Congressional approval.
- Federal government retains authority beyond the 3 NM limit.

C. Supreme Court Rulings

- Reaffirmed federal supremacy in defining maritime boundaries.
- Limited states’ claims based on admission acts or proximity to offshore islands.

Definitions of Key Maritime Zones

Zone	Extent	State Rights
Territorial Waters	0–12 NM	Full sovereignty, enforce all laws, regulate vessels.
Contiguous Zone	12–24 NM	Customs, immigration, fiscal, and pollution control.
Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ)	12–200 NM	Exclusive rights to marine resources and seabed minerals.
International Waters	Beyond 200 NM	Freedom of navigation, no state sovereignty.

Case Studies: Legal Challenges in the Gulf of Mexico

Texas and Florida

- Have extended boundaries (up to ~9.5 NM) recognized due to admission treaties.

- However, enforcement remains federally limited in practice.

Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama

- Claimed broader waters based on historical definitions.
- Supreme Court restricted them to 3 NM, except for islands.

Conclusion

Maritime boundaries are more than legal demarcations—they are instruments of sovereignty, resource control, and environmental responsibility. The evolving dynamics of climate change, geopolitical tensions, and technological advancements will continue to test the strength and adaptability of U.S. maritime governance. Effective management will require continuous legal clarity, interstate cooperation, and global diplomacy.

References

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2. United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), 1982.
3. Supreme Court rulings on maritime boundary disputes.
4. NOAA Office of Coast Survey Nautical Charts.
5. Scholarly articles on maritime law and U.S. coastal management.