

The Honorable Ryan Zinke  
Secretary  
Department of the Interior  
1849 C Street, N.W.  
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Secretary Zinke:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments from the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (Commission) relative to the new five-year National Offshore Oil and Gas Leasing Program on the Outer Continental Shelf (OCS) for 2019 – 2024. These comments are of a general nature for Atlantic waters, and we request that they be considered applicable to future leasing programs as well.

For over 75 years, the Commission has been responsible for coordinating the conservation and management of nearshore fish species, with membership from all the states of the US Atlantic coast from Maine to Florida. Fisheries resources are profoundly important to the social and economic well-being of US Atlantic coastal communities, and provide numerous benefits to the nation. In 2015, recreational and commercial fishing supported over 450,000 jobs and added over \$24 billion to the economy on the Atlantic coast alone<sup>1</sup>. The Commission's efforts to manage fishery resources are best served in the context of a healthy and resilient ecosystem.

As noted in our previous letter sent on July 26, 2017, the ocean is an acoustic environment and the Commission is concerned the propagation of sound from seismic surveys and other sound producing G&G activities may have significant impacts on fish populations, our coastal ecosystem, and the commercial and recreational fisheries on which they rely. Fish and other living marine resources depend on sound for their most vital life functions such as foraging, avoiding predators, navigating, communicating and finding mates, and the water column in which they live is a vital habitat supporting their life functions. At present, there is insufficient information about how seismic surveys and other G&G activities may affect fish, marine mammals and sea turtles, benthic communities, and ecosystem structure and function, but new studies continue to be released demonstrating potential negative impacts on the marine environment<sup>2,3</sup>. We recommend the areas listed in appendix 1 be off limits for OCS leasing in the Atlantic, acknowledging that many of these sites fall under more than one category.

The Commission asks that you consider the areas identified above and thanks you for the opportunity to provide comments to the Department of Interior on this important issue. We look forward to working with you in the future to ensure responsible development of domestic

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<sup>1</sup> National Marine Fisheries Service. 2017. Fisheries Economics of the United States, 2015. U.S. Dept. of Commerce, NOAA Tech. Memo. NMFS-F/SPO-170, 247p.

<sup>2</sup> Paxton, A.B. et al. 2017. Seismic survey noise disrupted fish use of a temperate reef. *Marine Policy* 78: 68-73.

<sup>3</sup> McCauley, R.D. et al. 2017. Widely used marine seismic survey air gun operations negatively impact zooplankton. *Nature Ecology & Evolution* 1. Doi: 10.1038/s41559-017-0195.

energy resources in the Atlantic. Please contact Lisa Havel, lhavel@asmfc.org, if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

DRAFT

## Appendix 1

Areas Recommend to be off limits for OCS leasing in the Atlantic, acknowledging that many of these sites fall under more than one category:

### Current and Proposed Habitat Areas of Particular Concern

NOAA Fisheries and the eight regional fishery management councils have identified specific habitat types and/or areas as Habitat Areas of Particular Concern (HAPC) (a subset of Essential Fish Habitat) based on their ecological function, sensitivity to human-induced degradation, current or potential stress from development activities, and/or rarity.

In the northeast and mid-Atlantic, current and proposed HAPCs include:

- Atlantic salmon habitat (11 rivers in Maine, including: Machias, East Machias, Pleasant, Narraguagus, Ducktrap, Sheepscot, Kennebec, Penobscot, St. Croix, Tunk Stream)
- Atlantic cod habitat
  - Inshore juvenile cod habitat (inshore areas of the Gulf of Maine and Southern New England, 0 – 20 m)
  - Northern Edge
  - Great South Channel
- Cashes Ledge
- Jeffreys Ledge & Stellwagen Bank
- Bear & Retriever Seamounts
- Canyons
  - Heezen Canyon
  - Lydonia, Gilbert, & Oceanographer Canyons
  - Hydrographer Canyon
  - Veatch Canyon
  - Alvin & Atlantis Canyons
  - Hudson Canyon and the shelf breaks
  - Toms, Middle Toms, & Hendrickson Canyons
  - Wilmington Canyon
  - Baltimore Canyon
  - Washington Canyon
  - Norfolk Canyon
- Deep sea coral habitat
- Golden tilefish habitat
- Summer flounder habitat

South Atlantic HAPCs include:

- Coastal migratory pelagic habitat
  - Sandy shoals of Cape Lookout, Cape Fear, and Cape Hatteras from shore to the ends of the respective shoals, but shoreward of the Gulf Stream
  - The Point
  - Ten-Fathom Ledge
  - Big Rock

- Charleston Bump
- Hurl Rocks
- The Point off Jupiter Inlet
- *Phragmatopoma* (worm reefs) off the central east coast of Florida
- Nearshore hard bottom south of Cape Canaveral
- The Hump off Islamorada, Florida
- The “Wall” off of the Florida Keys
- Pelagic *Sargassum*
- Atlantic coast estuaries with high numbers of Spanish mackerel and cobia based on abundance data from the ELMR program including Bogue Sound, New River, and Broad River
- Spiny lobster habitat
  - Florida Bay
  - Biscayne Bay
  - Card Sound
  - Coral/Hardbottom Habitat from Jupiter Inlet, Florida through the Dry Tortugas, Florida
- Snapper grouper habitat
  - Medium to high profile offshore hard bottoms where spawning normally occurs
  - Localities of known or likely periodic spawning aggregations
  - Nearshore hardbottom areas
  - The Point
  - Ten Fathom Ledge
  - Big Rock
  - Charleston Bump
  - Mangrove habitat
  - Seagrass habitat
  - Oyster/shell habitat
  - All coastal inlets
  - All state-designated nursery habitats of particular importance to snapper-grouper
  - Pelagic and benthic *Sargassum*
  - Hoyt Hills for wreckfish
  - The *Oculina* Bank Habitat Area of Particular Concern
  - All hermatypic coral habitats and reefs
  - Manganese outcroppings on the Blake Plateau
  - SAFMC designated Artificial Reef Special Management Zones
- Golden and blueline tilefish habitat
  - Irregular bottom comprised of troughs and terraces intermingled with sand, mud, or shell hash bottom
  - Mud-clay bottoms in depths of 150 – 300 m
  - Irregular bottom habitats along the shelf edge in 45 – 65 m depth, shelf break
  - Upper slope along the 100 fm contour (150 – 225 m)

- Hardbottom habitats characterized as rock overhangs, rock outcrops, manganese phosphorite rock slab formations, or rocky reefs in the South Atlantic Bight; and the Georgetown Hole (Charleston Lumps) off Georgetown, South Carolina
- Dolphin-Wahoo habitat
  - The Point
  - Ten Fathom Ledge
  - Big Rock
  - Charleston Bump
  - Georgetown Hole
  - The Point off Jupiter Inlet
  - The Hump off Islamorada, Florida
  - The Marathon Hump off Marathon, Florida
  - The “Wall” off of the Florida Keys
  - Pelagic *Sargassum*
- Penaeid shrimp habitat
  - All coastal inlets
  - All state-designated nursery habitats of particular importance to shrimp
  - State-identified overwintering areas
- Coral, coral reef, and live bottom habitat
  - Ten Fathom Ledge
  - Big Rock
  - The Point
  - Hurl Rocks
  - Charleston Bump
  - Gray’s Reef National Marine Sanctuary
  - *Phragmatopoma* (worm reef) reefs off the central east coast of Florida
  - *Oculina* Banks off the east coast of Florida from Ft. Pierce to Cape Canaveral
  - Nearshore (0 – 4 m) hard bottom off the east coast of Florida from Cape Canaveral to Broward County
  - Offshore (5 – 30 m) hard bottom off the east coast of Florida from Palm Beach County to Fowey Rocks
  - Biscayne Bay, Florida
  - Biscayne National Park, Florida
  - Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary
- Deepwater corals
  - Cape Lookout Coral HAPC
  - Cape Fear Coral HAPC
  - Stetson Reefs, Savannah and East Florida Lithoherms, and Miami Terrace Coral HAPC
  - Pourtales Terrace Coral HAPC
  - Blake Ridge Diapir Coral HAPC
- Deepwater Marine Protected Areas (MPAs)
  - Snowy Grouper Wreck MPA
  - Northern South Carolina MPA

- Edisto MPA
- Charleston Deep Artificial Reef MPA
- Georgia MPA
- North Florida MPA
- St. Lucie Hump MPA
- East Hump MPA

#### National Marine Sanctuaries, Parks, and Monuments

National Marine Sanctuaries, Parks, and Monuments work to preserve the beauty, biodiversity, historical connections, and economic productivity of some of the most special underwater areas in the United States, and are supported by the National Marine Sanctuaries, National Park Service Organic Acts, and Executive Orders. The current and proposed sanctuaries along the Atlantic coast include Stellwagon Bank (Massachusetts), Monitor (North Carolina), Mallows Bay (Maryland), Gray's Reef (Georgia), and the Florida Keys (Florida). National Parks include Biscayne and Dry Tortugas, both in Florida. Most recently, in 2016, the Northeast Canyons and Seamounts Marine National Monument was designated southeast of Georges Bank.