

United States Senate  
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

June 9, 2017

The Honorable Wilbur Ross  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Commerce  
1401 Constitution Ave NW  
Washington, DC 20230

Dear Secretary Ross,

This week, we celebrated World Oceans Day. At a time when the global community should be discussing new ways to protect the marine environment, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) instead announced a proposal to issue five authorizations that could seriously affect coastal economies along the entire Atlantic seaboard. This was done with little notice, an extremely short public comment period, and no scheduled public hearings. And possibly most problematic, these applications were declined by NOAA just five months ago. In the interest of transparency, government accountability, and meaningful public participation, we urge you to extend the comment period for these activities to at least 150 days, conduct public community meetings, and clarify key elements of the proposal.

On June 6, 2017, NOAA released a proposal to approve five applications submitted by companies seeking to conduct seismic airgun blasts along the Atlantic Coast, authorizing the harassment of marine mammals during the course of their surveys for oil and gas deposits. The Federal Register notice allows for only 30 days of public comment on a complex 91-page document proposing to authorize five separate activities with the potential to harm marine mammals.

For context, in July 2015, when NOAA announced the receipt of seismic applications, it solicited 30 days of public comment on a 2-page document. During that time, 720 pages of unique public comments were submitted to NOAA—many with significant scientific and economic concerns and outright opposition to issuance of approval to harass marine mammals.

And as of today, 125 Atlantic Coast communities, over 1,200 elected officials, and an alliance representing over 41,000 businesses and 500,000 fishing families have publicly opposed seismic airgun blasting and/or offshore drilling. The Mid- and South Atlantic Fishery Management Councils, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), the Department of Defense, and the Florida Defense Support Task Force have also expressed concern about ongoing and future oil and gas operations.

Furthermore, the proposal itself is confusing and vague. We urge you to issue clarification on several important topics. For example, the Federal Register notice includes two applications that NOAA has not previously included in a public notice of receipt, and does not include a map

showing each of the five applications proposed to be approved. Also, one of the applications has changed names since it was first filed. To allow for relevant, timely, and thorough public comment on the proposal, it is essential that NOAA publish clear maps for each application, and each application should be cited using a consistent name.

Finally, despite the potential to affect coastal resources along the entire East Coast, it does not appear that NOAA intends to conduct any public meetings. We find this lack of stakeholder outreach unacceptable. We would expect that NOAA would conduct public meetings in each of the states most likely to be impacted by this activity, including Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Virginia, Maryland, Delaware, and New Jersey.

The Marine Mammal Commission wrote in 2015 that in considering these kinds of surveys, NOAA should minimize duplication, address inconsistencies in the estimates of marine mammals that would be impacted, and fully evaluate and monitor whether proposed mitigation measures are likely to be successful. NOAA's current proposed approvals do not address these recommendations.

The science suggests that airgun surveys themselves have the potential to cause significant harm, and could jeopardize the continued existence of the critically endangered North Atlantic Right Whale. Given the widespread and strong public interest in this issue, it is essential that NOAA provide thorough and transparent information, and a reasonable opportunity for the public to participate in the review process.

Sincerely,



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Bill Nelson  
U.S. Senator



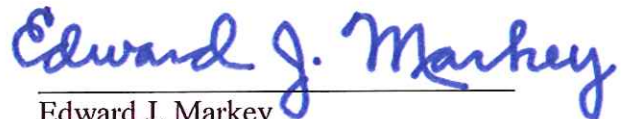
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Cory A. Booker  
U.S. Senator



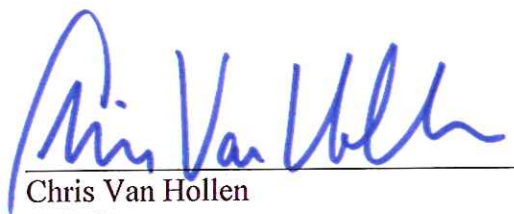
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Sheldon Whitehouse  
U.S. Senator



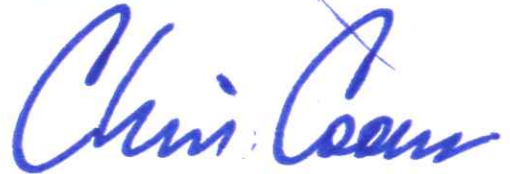
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Edward J. Markey  
U.S. Senator



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Chris Van Hollen  
U.S. Senator



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Christopher A. Coons  
U.S. Senator





Jeanne Shaheen  
U.S. Senator



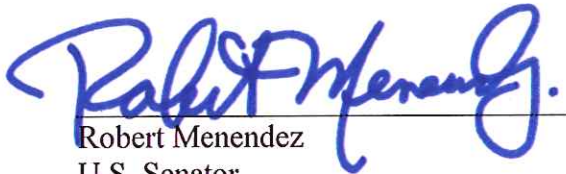
Richard Blumenthal  
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Benjamin L. Cardin  
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Margaret Wood Hassan  
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