



Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council

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Michael P. Luisi, Chairman | P. Weston Townsend, Vice Chairman
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March 16, 2021

The Honorable Debra Haaland
Secretary of the Interior
Department of the Interior
1849 C. Street, N.W.
Washington, DC 20230

Dear Secretary Haaland:

Please accept these comments on behalf of the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council (Mid-Atlantic Council) regarding your review of the commercial fishing prohibition in the Northeast Canyons and Seamounts Marine National Monument (Northeast Marine Monument). The Mid-Atlantic Council manages fifteen species of fish and shellfish under seven fishery management plans (FMPs), plus more than 50 forage species that are managed as ecosystem component species across all of our FMPs. Although our management area extends from New York through Virginia, a considerable portion of the catch from some of our managed fisheries comes from New England waters.

Section 3 of President Biden's "Executive Order on Protecting Public Health and the Environment and Restoring Science to Tackle the Climate Crisis" requires you to recommend whether a commercial fishing prohibition within the Northeast Marine Monument should be restored. The Mid-Atlantic Council recommends that management of fisheries in marine monument areas should remain under the jurisdiction of the Regional Fishery Management Councils (RFMCs) and NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS). Any fishing restrictions within the Northeast Marine Monument should be developed through the science-based, participatory management process required by the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA). The Mid-Atlantic Council joins the seven other RFMCs in unanimous opposition to the use of the Antiquities Act of 1906 to implement fishing restrictions in the U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).¹

Working in partnership with NMFS, the RFMCs have more than four decades of experience successfully managing our nation's fisheries and marine ecosystems. Through implementation of the MSA, the United States is the global leader in the successful conservation and management of fishery resources and associated ecosystems. The RFMCs are charged not only with preventing overfishing and rebuilding overfished stocks but also with achieving optimum yield – the amount of fish which will provide the greatest overall benefit to the Nation. The RFMCs are also required to protect essential fish habitat, minimize bycatch, and comply with protections for species listed under the Endangered Species Act and other Federal laws.

¹ See comment letters sent to President Obama (6/26/16), President Trump (3/1/17), Secretary Zinke and Secretary Ross (5/16/17), Secretary Ross (5/29/20), and Acting Secretary De la Vega (2/26/21), all available at <http://www.fisherycouncils.org/cc-c-correspondence>

Through our work as stewards of U.S. fishery resources, the RFMCs have become leaders in marine conservation. Each RFMC has developed, or is developing, some form of a fishery ecosystem plan or a fishery-based management plan. In the Mid-Atlantic, we use what is called an “Ecosystem Approach to Fisheries Management.” Within the Mid-Atlantic Council’s 71,000 square mile management area, about 58%, or 41,428 square miles, is covered by the Frank R. Lautenberg Deep Sea Coral Protection Area. In this area, all bottom-tending fishing gear is prohibited to protect sensitive deep sea habitats. The management measures and specific boundaries for the protection area were approved by the Council in 2015 following an extensive, science-based process in collaboration with the fishing industry. Similarly, the New England Fishery Management Council has approved restrictions on bottom-tending gear within 87% of the monument area through its Deep Sea Coral Amendment. In each region you will find examples of how the RFMCs have carefully crafted spatial management measures and fishing restrictions to protect sensitive habitats and achieve other conservation goals.

The RFMCs are required to make all fisheries management decisions through a transparent, public process. The open forum provided by the Council system allows everyone to have a say in the stewardship of our marine resources and how fisheries are managed. We are concerned that the top-down approach used to designate and implement fishing restrictions within the Northeast Marine Monument did not provide adequate opportunities for public input. While a number of public events and meetings were held, fishermen and other affected stakeholders were not given a formal opportunity to comment on the proposed boundaries or management measures.

Implementation of fishing restrictions under the authority of the Antiquities Act of 1906 subverts the effective and time-tested fisheries management process established by the MSA. The RFMCs have the knowledge, experience, and technical expertise needed to meet conservation objectives while ensuring productive and sustainable fisheries. We recommend that fisheries management responsibility for the Northeast Marine Monument area should be retained by the New England Fishery Management Council.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on this issue. We look forward to working with this Administration to ensure the continued sustainability and conservation of our nation’s marine resources.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "C. Moore". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "C" and a long, sweeping underline.

Dr. Christopher M. Moore
Executive Director, Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council

CC: The Honorable Gina Raimondo, Acting Secretary of Commerce
Mr. Paul Doremus, Acting Assistant Administrator for Fisheries NOAA/NMFS
Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council Members
Mr. Tom Nies, New England Fishery Management Council, Executive Director