

WRITTEN TESTIMONY BY

**JANET COIT
ASSISTANT ADMINISTRATOR FOR FISHERIES
NATIONAL MARINE FISHERIES SERVICE
AND
ACTING ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF COMMERCE FOR OCEANS AND
ATMOSPHERE
AND DEPUTY NOAA ADMINISTRATOR
NATIONAL OCEANIC AND ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE**

**LEGISLATIVE HEARING
BEFORE THE**

**COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES
SUBCOMMITTEE ON WATER, OCEANS, AND WILDLIFE
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

MARCH 17, 2022

Chairman Huffman, Ranking Member Bentz, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today regarding several ocean-related bills. My name is Janet Coit, and I am the Assistant Administrator for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), Acting Assistant Secretary of Commerce for Oceans and Atmosphere, and Deputy NOAA Administrator. As you know, NOAA is responsible for the stewardship of the nation's ocean wildlife and their habitats, resulting in productive and sustainable fisheries, recovery and conservation of protected resources, healthy ecosystems, and other benefits. These vital services are backed by sound science and effective management.

I am proud to help lead NOAA, which has provided the world with authoritative climate science and trusted services for 51 years. NOAA helps stakeholders better understand the changing climate and ocean conditions, what's at risk, and what actions are needed to safeguard America's valuable marine resources and resource-dependent communities. Through these efforts, NOAA strives to build a climate ready nation that can adapt to and become resilient against the unprecedented changes we face.

NOAA appreciates the Committee's interest in protecting and sustaining the nation's marine fisheries and protected species, and we stand ready to work with Congress to address the current

and future challenges to our marine ecosystems. I look forward to discussing these bills with you today.

H.R. 6491 - *Salmon FISH Act*

NOAA supports the goals of H.R. 6491, *the Salmon FISH Act*. It would complement our ongoing efforts to conserve, protect, and recover Atlantic and Pacific salmon populations, protect and restore their habitat, and manage sustainable salmon fisheries. Salmon are incredible species and have a dynamic life cycle that includes time in fresh and saltwater habitats. These fish are born in freshwater streams and rivers, migrate to coastal estuaries, then enter the ocean where they mature. They usually return as adults to the same streams where they were born to spawn and begin the cycle again. For a critical part of their lifecycle, salmon depend on cool, freshwater streams to hatch their eggs and to grow mature enough to swim back into the ocean. Access in and out of this upstream habitat is vital to their survival.

Protecting “stronghold” salmon populations and their watersheds has long been a pillar of our salmon recovery plans. Our salmon recovery plans provide a roadmap to recover and minimize threats to salmon listed as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act. While we must target our efforts and resources on populations at imminent risk of being lost, sustaining and protecting salmon strongholds is also essential to achieving recovery and safeguarding salmon populations against the effects of climate change.

More specifically, this bill would protect headwater habitats and cold-water refugia, which is consistent with NOAA’s efforts to improve climate resiliency of salmon populations and reintroduce them into blocked areas within their historical range. This bill also is consistent with activities funded under the Pacific Coastal Salmon Recovery Fund to conserve salmon stocks that are important to the exercise of tribal treaty rights and native subsistence fishing.

NOAA welcomes this interest from Congress in the conservation of healthy salmon populations, their habitat, and the communities that depend on them. We would welcome the opportunity to work with this Committee to further improve this bill’s clarity and effectiveness.

H.R. 3431 - *Increasing Community Access to Resiliency Grants Act*

H.R. 3431, *the Increasing Community Access to Resiliency Grants Act*, directs NOAA to establish a publicly available website with contact information regarding grants available to assist state, tribal, and local governments with resiliency, adaptation, and mitigation of climate change and sea level rise. The bill also directs NOAA to conduct outreach activities to inform state, tribal, and local governments of the grants. NOAA is supportive of this bill, and any efforts to facilitate and ensure our grant opportunities are clear and easily accessible to the public. We currently engage with prospective grant applicants through public webinars and direct

communication. In addition to providing outreach and technical assistance to state, tribal, and local governments, we also work with nonprofit and for-profit organizations, public-private partnerships, and academic institutions, who are eligible for several of our resilience related grant opportunities.

H.R. 6987 - *Protecting our Marine Mammals Act*

NOAA is responsible for stewardship of the nation's ocean resources and marine habitat. As such, we support our nation's blue economy, and strive to foster economic, subsistence, and recreational activities while protecting marine species and recognizing the subsistence use of such species. H.R. 6987, *the Protecting our Marine Mammals Act*, complements this work by considering the impacts of vessel traffic, human-caused sound in the ocean, and other human activities on marine mammals and their habitats.

This bill proposes to establish a near real-time monitoring program to help mitigate vessel strike risk to large whales, with a pilot program focused on endangered North Atlantic right whales. The protections in this bill complement the surveys and regulations already in place to mitigate vessel strike impacts for marine mammal conservation and recovery.

Additionally, marine mammals and other marine life rely on sound for many critical activities, including breeding, foraging/hunting, maintaining social structure, and avoiding predators. This bill would maintain and expanding an ocean noise reference station network, establish grant programs to develop and implement technologies that reduce vessel noise, and require an assessment of existing technologies that could reduce underwater noise from U.S. government vessels. The bill authorizes funding for the Ocean Noise Reference Network, which provides baseline information about ocean noise levels, detects changes in ocean noise, and monitors whale migrations. The bill also authorizes a grant program to help seaports reduce the threats of vessel strike, disturbance, underwater sound, and habitat alteration from shipping activities and port operations.

With respect to Section 1, multiple programs across NOAA have long recognized the growing threat of ocean noise and have collaboratively developed an agency-wide Ocean Noise Strategy, released in 2016, which integrates all of NOAA's efforts to comprehensively address noise impacts to aquatic species and their habitats. We look forward to working with the committee to inform them about the NOAA Ocean Noise Strategy and relevant programs.

NOAA is generally supportive of the goals of H.R. 6987 and its aims to mitigate the impacts of human-caused sound in the ocean, and other human activities to marine mammals in areas of importance. We would welcome the opportunity to work with the Committee on this bill.

H.R. 6651 - Alaska Salmon Research Task Force Act

NOAA supports the goals of H.R. 6651, *the Alaska Salmon Research Task Force Act*. In Alaska, salmon are managed by the State of Alaska, but research on salmon biology, ecology, and social-economic importance to stakeholders and communities is conducted by NOAA and a number of other agencies and entities. Given the low salmon run-sizes, particularly in Western Alaska, and continued efforts to manage bycatch, federal and state research to support Pacific salmon management in Alaska would benefit from better and increased coordination. This bill aims to improve this coordination by forming a new Research Task Force composed of Alaska's salmon stakeholders. This Task Force, comprised of Alaska Natives involved in subsistence uses in rural Alaska, policy makers, and research experts, would study Pacific salmon trends and create a unified research strategy for Pacific salmon in Alaska to support salmon management.

To ensure this bill is as effective as possible, careful planning will be needed to consider and understand what work is being done by the other nascent salmon task forces organized by the State of Alaska and Indigenous groups. NOAA appreciates this interest from Congress to further support a coordinated salmon research strategy in Alaska and would welcome the opportunity to work with this Committee.

H.R. 6785 - Right Whale Coexistence Act

NOAA supports the goals of H.R. 6785, *the Right Whale Coexistence Act*, which would support the conservation of North Atlantic right whales by providing financial resources for conservation programs and projects. The North Atlantic right whale is one of the world's most endangered large whale species. The latest preliminary estimate suggests there are fewer than 350 individuals remaining. They are also currently experiencing an Unusual Mortality Event, with 50 known dead or seriously injured since 2017. Given the precarious state of this species, NOAA appreciates Congress's interest to further support North Atlantic right whale conservation and recovery.

NOAA has and will continue to take action to mitigate the two primary threats to the species: vessel strikes and entanglement in commercial fishing gear. Since 2008, we have maintained vessel speed restrictions requiring most vessels 65 feet or greater in length to transit 10 knots or less in certain areas and times of the year to reduce vessel strike risk, and we are currently working to enhance these measures. In addition, we have and will continue to work extensively with our partners on the Atlantic Large Whale Take Reduction Team to develop measures to reduce the risk of entanglement while allowing commercial fisheries to thrive.

H.R. 6785 authorizes financial assistance for projects designed to reduce lethal and sublethal effects of human activities on North Atlantic right whales. It would also authorize projects that

provide potential economic benefits to small businesses and promote partnerships with foreign governments, tribes, local communities, and maritime industries.

Additionally, this bill would authorize the Continuous Plankton Recorder survey. This survey began sampling in the Gulf of Maine in 1961 and provides long-term, regional information about marine plankton, the foundation of the marine food web. Over the past decade, North Atlantic right whales began changing their habitat use, likely as a result of climate change impacts on prey (zooplankton) availability. While climate change and prey availability have likely contributed to the whales' low birth rate, the increased use of areas without conservation measures has also magnified more direct threats such as entanglements and vessel strikes. Continuing to assess North Atlantic right whale prey distribution will improve our understanding of the link between prey availability and reproduction, and will help us detect future changes in habitat use.

As one note of concern, the bill would require NOAA to make all information relating to the projects publicly available. Doing so may be challenging due to NOAA's deliberate process to allow confidentiality during grant selection and to secure trade secrets or other commercial information, consistent with the Freedom of Information Act and other laws.

NOAA will continue to pursue holistic approaches to protect North Atlantic right whales. NOAA welcomes Congress' interest in furthering North Atlantic right whale conservation.

Conclusion

NOAA values the opportunity to work with this Committee on these bills and other priority issues in order to ensure responsible stewardship of the ocean and important marine resources. Thank you and your staff for your support of NOAA and our work on ocean and coastal issues. I look forward to your questions.