

U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Natural Resources
Washington, DC 20515

September 18, 2018

Chris Oliver
Assistant Administrator
National Marine Fisheries Service
1315 East-West Highway
Silver Spring, MD 20910

Dear Assistant Administrator Oliver:

I am writing to express my concern about a recent email sent from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) to Congressional staff regarding the decision by NOAA leadership to scale back the Southeast Fishery Science Center's sea turtle conservation activities at the Galveston Sea Turtle Facility due to "budget constraints." Based on the communication my staff has had with NOAA officials, I am alarmed to learn that NOAA's plan is to effectively terminate the laboratory, even though it only costs between \$600,000 - \$800,000 to operate annually.

The Galveston Sea Turtle Facility is instrumental in developing, evaluating, and refining fishing gear to promote sea turtle conservation while retaining a sustainable fisheries catch."¹ According to NOAA's website, the Galveston Laboratory is the only facility of its size and class in the world.

As you are aware, all species of sea turtles in U.S. waters are listed as either threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act. One of the greatest threats facing sea turtle populations in the United States and abroad is the incidental catch by fishing gear. In fact, according to NOAA's own estimates, the fisheries in the Gulf of Mexico - the Southeast shrimp trawl fishery, in particular - interact with sea turtles over 500,000 times a year, resulting in tens of thousands of deaths.²

¹ <https://www.galvestonlab.sefsc.noaa.gov/seaturtles/index.html>

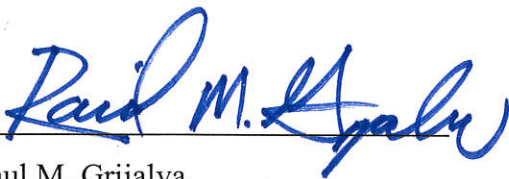
² NOAA, NMFS, SERO. (2014). Endangered Species Act - Section 7 Consultation Biological Opinion (Biological Opinion). National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), Southeast Regional Office (SERO), Table 39 at p.185. Retrieved from http://sero.nmfs.noaa.gov/protected_resources/section_7/freq_biop/documents/fisheries_bo/shrimp_biop_2014.pdf

Turtle Excluder Devices (TEDs) have been proven to be a viable solution to help save tens of thousands of sea turtles. When properly installed, TEDs are 97 percent effective in allowing sea turtles to escape trawl nets. Unfortunately, TEDs are not currently required in all fishing trawls that interact with sea turtles. Continued research at the Galveston Laboratory to ensure that TEDs are as effective as possible and properly designed and deployed in trawl fisheries will not only save sea turtles but also aid in reducing bycatch of other non-targeted species. I commend the work that NOAA has done in the past on TEDs, but the work is not done. It is premature to shut down the Galveston Sea Turtle Facility.

In addition, it does not appear that NOAA has a clear plan for the “transition.” Please provide detailed information about how, when, and why the Southeast Fishery Science Center will be scaling back its sea turtle conservation activities at the Galveston Laboratory. Please also elaborate as to why there are budgetary constraints for sea turtle conservation activities at this location.

I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Raul M. Grijalva
Ranking Member
House Natural Resources Committee