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Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-3006

May 11, 2016

Eileen Sobeck
Assistant Administrator for Fisheries
NOAA Fisheries
National Ocean and Atmospheric Administration
U.S. Department of Commerce
1315 East-West Highway
Silver Spring, MD 20910

Dear Assistant Administrator Sobeck:

I write in regards to pending applications to conduct geologic and geophysical activities (i.e. seismic testing) in the Atlantic Ocean. I am deeply concerned about the prospect of seismic testing being conducted within the Atlantic, and the damage such testing could cause to our coastal communities, both environmentally and economically. While I encourage NOAA Fisheries to go forward with its plans for a public comment period, I am respectfully requesting NOAA Fisheries to also hold a public hearing on the applications it is currently considering.

As you know, NOAA Fisheries is conducting a review of several Incidental Harassment Authorization (IHA) applications by companies that have applied for permits with the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM) to conduct seismic testing in the Atlantic Ocean. BOEM cannot issue these permits unless NOAA Fisheries approves these IHA applications.

Seismic testing involves using large, seismic airguns, towed behind ships, to fire loud blasts of air at the ocean floor. The soundwaves produced by these blasts are reflected back to the surface, and measured to determine whether oil, gas, or other minerals are present under the ocean. These blasts can be repeated every 10 seconds.

If the applications are approved by both NOAA Fisheries and BOEM, these companies would be allowed to conduct seismic testing on an unprecedented scale in areas inhabited by both commercially important fisheries and endangered species. The cumulative and direct effects on marine mammals and other marine wildlife could be severe. Seismic testing can disrupt migratory patterns, cause marine wildlife to abandon important habitats, and disrupt mating and feeding. The soundwave blasts can also destroy fish eggs and larvae. Additionally, seismic testing can cause deafness in whales and dolphins, both of which rely on hearing to reproduce, locate food, and communicate.


The potential damage to marine life should concern New Jersey coastal communities. Tourism and recreational and commercial fishing are important economic drivers for the Jersey Shore. Even though the pending applications would only allow seismic testing in regions of the Mid- and South Atlantic Planning Areas, the testing could hurt fisheries and other marine wildlife that are important to New Jersey.

NOAA Fisheries should reject these IHA applications. Doing so would highlight the need to protect the Atlantic Ocean. Indeed, it would be puzzling for NOAA Fisheries to approve these IHA applications mere months after the Department of the Interior recognized the importance of protecting the Atlantic Ocean by removing it from its 2017-2022 Outer Continental Shelf Oil and Gas Leasing Program.

That is why I am respectfully requesting NOAA Fisheries to hold a public hearing on these pending IHA applications. Coastal communities, especially those who depend on commercial and recreational fisheries, should have an opportunity to voice their concerns about these permits being issued. Environmental groups should have an official forum to present their research into the harmful effects of seismic testing on marine mammals, fish, and other wildlife. Having a place for these, and other, important stakeholders to present their objections is important to ensuring a transparent process.

I look forward to your reply.

Sincerely,


FRANK PALLONE, JR.
MEMBER OF CONGRESS