

Ms. Kerry Allison
Executive Director, Eastern Shore of Virginia Tourism Commission
32383 Lankford Hwy
Cape Charles, VA 23310

Ms. Abigail Ross Hopper
Director, Bureau of Ocean Energy Management
1849 C St. NW
Washington, D.C. 20240

February 29, 2016

RE: Draft Proposed 2017-2022 Outer Continental Shelf (OCS) Oil and Gas Leasing Program,
Atlantic OCS Geological and Geophysical (G&G) Activities Involving Use of Seismic Airguns

Dear Director Hopper,

The Eastern Shore of Virginia (ESVA) Tourism Commission recently voted to formally oppose both offshore drilling and seismic airgun testing in the Atlantic Ocean. As a group that directly supports and depends on the local tourism and hospitality industries, we consider this a vital issue to our economic welfare. We believe the risks are too great to justify offshore oil and gas exploration off Virginia's coast.

In Virginia, the tourism industry supports more than 200,000 jobs, making it the fifth largest private employer in the state, and brings in visitors that spend upwards of \$22.4 billion each year. Here on the Eastern Shore, the local tourism economy requires healthy coastal communities and clean ocean environments to prosper. The majority of our services at the ESVA Tourism Commission revolve around the outdoors, and we reap the benefits of Virginia's natural environment including the pristine coastline, ample migratory bird habitat, thriving turtle and whale populations, and ideal conditions for fishing and growing shellfish. All of the natural resources that allow tourism on the Eastern Shore to flourish would be threatened by offshore oil development activities.

The coastal industrialization and pollution that comes with offshore drilling will seriously affect the coast of Virginia. Our state is the leading seafood producer on the East Coast, the third largest producer in the nation, and our oyster harvest alone contributes more than \$50 million to the market annually. The entirety of this seafood industry, particularly the shellfish production industry, is contingent on healthy and clean water. The day to day pollution associated with offshore drilling (wastewater, shavings, drilling, sludge, and even routine leaks and spills) could devastate our fishing and shellfish industries.

Additionally, the first step to offshore drilling is seismic airgun testing, a process that can harm marine life while searching for oil and gas reserves. Several areas subjected to seismic airgun surveys have seen

reduced catch rates in commercially and recreationally important fish. Particularly concerning for Virginia are the demonstrated stress responses in both bivalves and crabs, as Virginia has become known for both its oysters and its Blue crabs. We do not support a procedure that would unnecessarily threaten these sea creatures that sustain us on the Eastern Shore.

The Eastern Shore of Virginia, particularly the tourism industry, would take on an extremely high amount of risk with little to no benefit if the federal government continues with its current plans to conduct seismic airgun testing and move forward with the proposed oil and gas leasing program as it currently stands. The ESVA Tourism Commission strongly opposes both seismic airgun testing and offshore drilling off the coast of Virginia. We urge you to halt all seismic permits and remove Virginia from the next iteration of the 2017-2022 OCS Oil and Gas Leasing Program.

Sincerely,

Kerry Allison
Executive Director, Eastern Shore of Virginia Tourism Commission

CC:

The Honorable Terry McAuliffe, Governor of Maryland
Ms. Kathryn Sullivan, Secretary, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association
Ms. Eileen Sobeck, Assistant Administrator, National Marine Fisheries Service