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WATER FOR ALL.

**Testimony of Rachel Silverstein, Ph.D.
Executive Director and Waterkeeper, Miami Waterkeeper
Before the House Committee on Natural Resources and the House Committee on Small
Business
“Joint Oversight Hearing”**

August 4, 2015

Chairman Bishop, Chairman Chabot, Ranking Member Grijalva, Ranking Member Velazquez, and members of the committees – thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony for the hearing titled, “Restricted Access at Biscayne National Park and Implications for Fishermen, Small Businesses, the Local Economy and Environment.”

My name is Rachel Silverstein, and I am the Executive Director and Waterkeeper of Miami Waterkeeper (MWK). MWK is grassroots non-profit organization that advocates for the Biscayne Bay watershed and its wildlife. Our goal is to empower citizens to protect their right to swimmable, drinkable, and fishable water and to support Miami’s clean water economy. As you can see, supporting fishing is one of the three major pillars of our organization’s mission. Nothing is more harmful to people’s ability to fish than a lack of fish. And, nothing is more detrimental to the local economies that depend on fishing than a lack of fish.

I am writing today to ask that you help to bring fish back to South Florida and to Biscayne National Park (“the Park”). I urge you to do everything possible to restore the quality of the fishing experiences in Biscayne National Park and increase the size and quantity of fish in Biscayne National Park, and the industry that depends on healthy fish stocks. To accomplish that end, I ask that you fully support National Park Service’s proposed General Management Plan, which establishes a marine reserve in Biscayne National Park.

Biscayne Bay is an ecologically and economically important body of water at the center of one of the fastest growing cities in the nation. The Bay contains corals, seagrass meadows and mangroves forests, and is home to over a dozen threatened, endangered, or protected marine species. We have built our city on an ecological and aesthetic jewel, and, in one of the great tragedies of our time, we risk losing that jewel and all of the services it provides, and the economic engine it supports.

Over half a million visitors went to the Park in 2014. They went for unprecedented access, just off of our shore, to the only living coral reef in the continental US. They went for unparalleled fishing



in pristine waters. However, this economic driver is in peril. We have already lost well-over 80% of our coral reefs since the 1970's. And, fewer coral mean fewer fish. **Landings of reef fish in south Florida have declined by ~95% since the 1960's. Fewer fish mean fewer dollars to our recreational fishing industry.** Action must be taken now to turn the tide of fish population decline in the Park and to restore it to its former glory, preserving it for generations to come.

We are losing significant economic investments in our local recreational fishing industry every year because our fish stocks are so degraded, and fishermen choose to visit the Bahamas or Belize, for example, for the remaining big fish trophies, instead of Biscayne National Park. This has been estimated to represent a loss of over \$1 billion dollars to South Florida. **It's time to bring more and bigger fish back to Florida.**

There is one known way to do just that. The science is very clear. **Marine reserves work**, and they work quickly, and the result is that everyone benefits from a healthier ecosystem, including, and especially fishermen. Fishing yield will most likely increase outside of the marine reserve too. If action is not taken immediately, it could be too late to recover the stocks, even with stringent protections and more far-reaching regulations. In New England's commercial cod fisheries, for example, the economic and cultural foundation of the region, even draconian cuts in catch limits over a period of almost a decade has still not resulted in the recovery of the fish populations. They waited too long. Opposition to management of the stocks was simply too great. And now the fishery is all but gone. Do not make the same mistake in Biscayne National Park and south Florida's recreational reef fisheries. Support this small, modest reserve now, only 6% of the Park, and allow the area's small businesses economy to grow with the size of the fish in Biscayne National Park.

Furthermore, public participation in this process has been extensive and comprehensive. The Park Service hosted 22 public meetings and received about 42,000 pieces of correspondence on the issue, showing 90% public support for the creation of a marine reserve. From listening sessions to workshops to multiple rounds of public comments periods and drafts, the public has made its voice heard, and it's clear that the public supports more fish in Florida, and supports this reserve to make that a reality.

We should preserve the National Park Service's ability to determine management of federally protected areas. Let's not lose out on the opportunity to help Biscayne National Park thrive for

generations as a result of this management plan. **Marine reserves are the most powerful tool in our toolbox for recovering fish populations, and should be implemented here in Biscayne National Park to stem the tide of further economic losses from degraded reef and fish resources.**

I therefore ask you support the National Parks Service's plan to implement a small marine reserve in Biscayne National Park, only 6% of the park's area, for visitors, for eco-tourism, for fishermen, and for the future of our wild areas in South Florida.

Thank you for the opportunity to have this testimony entered into the record.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'RS', with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

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