

Rep. Earl L. “Buddy” Carter

Natural Resources Committee Member Day Testimony

- Mr. Chairman, thank you for allowing me to testify today at this Member Day hearing so that I can discuss before this Committee some priorities that I am leading, and I believe are important.
- I do not have the pleasure of sitting on the Natural Resources Committee, but I represent the entire coast of Georgia and am thankful for the opportunity to share.
- The issue most pressing to my district is NOAA’s proposed rule to regulate vessel speeds to protect the North Atlantic Right Whale.
- The Committee is well aware of this issue, and I am thankful for its work on the issue through hearings and legislation.
- The proposed rule will cause grave safety issues for recreational vessels and pilot vessels alike, as it presents a navigational concern for traversing our nation’s shipping channels and at sea.
- The National Marine Fisheries Service is proposing to broaden the Atlantic Right Whale Strike Reduction Rule by requiring vessels 35 to 65 feet in length to maintain a speed of roughly 11.5 mph for much of the East Coast.
- I am incredibly worried that the speed restrictions imposed by NOAA’s rule would all but shut down the thriving communities we have up and down the East coast.
- Communities like ours in Georgia depend on the ocean for our livelihoods.
- My district relies heavily on trade through our two major ports – the port of Savannah and the port of Brunswick.
- This proposed rule could cause unnecessary confusion and safety concerns for those navigating the federal channels to these ports.

- Simply put, when harbor pilots face rough conditions, they should not be second guessing their ability to speed up and navigate to safety.
- We have a vibrant blue economy that includes fishing and recreation of all kinds and depends on using vessels of all lengths and sizes to do business.
- I have significant concerns about how this will impact the state's recreational boating industry, which has an annual impact of \$4.3 billion.
- Unfortunately, NOAA's calculations for determining the projected economic impact of their proposed rule are wrong and do not fully account for these disastrous impacts.
- For example, it does not consider the differences in hull design between recreational and commercial vessels.
- Estimates say that this rule could threaten up to 340,000 American jobs, and negatively impact nearly \$84 billion in economic contributions.
- Boaters who use 35-foot or larger vessels will simply not take trips to fish or any other reason, and the market will die for these kinds of vessels.
- That's how this rule threatens 27,000 direct and indirect jobs in Georgia related to recreational fishing and boating.
- Using NOAA's own data, the chances that a recreational vessel will strike a right whale is less than one in a million.
- What is worse is that this proposed rule may only be the beginning.
- Rice's whale in the Gulf of Mexico has recently received similar attention with some suggesting similar vessel speed restrictions in the Gulf of Mexico.
- Thankfully, NOAA has denied an initial petition to do so, but it is not hard to believe that if NOAA uses this approach in the Atlantic for the right whale, it will do so elsewhere.
- There is bipartisan agreement that we can protect the endangered right whales without harming our ports and coastal communities.

- We need to protect the right whales, but we have to balance that with public safety and the needs of our coastal shipping economy.
- For example, buoys with sensors to help detect these whales have already been placed off Georgia's coast.
- Technology can play a key role in balancing the safety of both the right whale and boaters, as well as our coastal economy.
- We all want to protect the North Atlantic Right Whale.
- In fact, the Right Whale is the state mammal of Georgia.
- But we can't implement policies that would threaten the livelihoods of millions of people – not just in my district, but up and down the east coast.
- What we can do, however, is implement smart policies that work.
- That is why I am proud to lead a bipartisan effort to oppose NOAA's proposed rule by introducing the 'Protecting Whales, Human Safety and the Economy Act of 2023.'
- This bill will prevent NOAA from implementing this proposed rule until the Department of Commerce can fully implement new monitoring systems for North American Right Whales already approved by Congress.
- I am optimistic that solutions like more effective tracking will allow us to know where and when a Right Whale is in an area and if it will be appropriate to implement narrow speed restrictions.
- While the bill has been referred to the T&I Committee, I urge the Committee to continue its work to combat rules and regulations from the Administration that can damage our communities so significantly.
- Another similarly damaging proposal would be to implement area closures in the South Atlantic in the name of restoring Red Snapper populations.

- That is why I also would urge the Committee to support and consider Rep. Rutherford's bill, the Red Snapper Act.
- This bill would prevent NOAA from implementing area closures in the South Atlantic until the Great Red Snapper Count is complete, and the findings are integrated into the fishery's stock assessment.
- The Great Red Snapper Count is an independent study Congress has funded over the last three years that will deliver new, reliable data on abundance, genomics, and mortality of the red snapper stock by 2025.
- While the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council has rejected proposed closures, the threat remains and would be devastating for anglers in my district.
- Another issue that is important to my district is the Okefenokee Swamp, which is a part of the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge.
- Established in 1937, the Refuge is one of the world's largest freshwater ecosystems, home to over a thousand species with hundreds of acres of wetlands.
- We are proud to have a truly unique natural wonder in our state and treasure it.
- The Department of Interior recently announced its intention to nominate the Okefenokee Swamp for inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage List.
- I have supported this effort by our own community to receive this designation and am eager to share the swamp with the entire world.
- That said, as we pursue this designation, I ask that the Committee ensure that the Department of Interior and any other federal agency remain committed to the personal property rights of those in the community.
- As I mentioned, the inscription of the Okefenokee Swamp on the UNESCO World Heritage site list is a home-grown effort from our community.

- The landowners around the Swamp respect it and want to conserve our environment more than anyone.
- Inclusion of a site in the World Heritage List does not affect U.S. sovereignty or the management of the sites, which remain subject only to U.S. law.
- Nor should it lead to invasions of personal property right, especially in rural areas that are eager to grow and prosper.
- Lastly, I will mention the need for further permitting reform, particularly through NEPA.
- We need to be able to build in this country in order to thrive and prosper.
- Whether it is for energy independence, critical minerals, mining, broadband deployment, new factories for important industries like semiconductors, or anything else, permitting is the number one issue holding us back.
- We took a great first step under the Fiscal Responsibility Act, but it should be just that – a first step.
- I urge the Committee to continue that work so America can build again.
- I thank you for the opportunity to testify on my priorities.