



March 15, 2022

The Honorable Raúl Grijalva, Chair
House Natural Resources Committee
1324 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Bruce Westerman, Ranking Member
House Natural Resources Committee
1324 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Re: Aquariums supporting H.R. 6987, to reduce the impacts of vessels on marine mammals

Dear Chair Grijalva and Ranking Member Westerman,

On behalf of the nation's leading aquariums, we thank you for holding a hearing on H.R. 6987, to reduce the impacts of vessels on marine mammals, sponsored by Rep. Rick Larsen (D-WA). This bill advances proven solutions to make our seas safer for whales and other marine mammals by reducing the effects of ship traffic and anthropogenic underwater noise on the marine environment. We offer our strong support for this important legislation and call on you to also include vessel speed limit provisions that reduce ship strike risk and other impacts of vessels on vulnerable marine mammals.

As beloved, trusted science-based institutions in communities across the country, aquariums showcase the wonder of nature, inspiring diverse audiences to care, and more importantly, to take conservation actions. Aquariums collectively help advance federal and state conservation policies, mobilize thousands of visitors and online audience members to take individual and policy advocacy actions, and adopt business strategies that demonstrate our conservation commitment and promote sustainability in the broader marketplace. We are dedicated to improving the health of the nation's ocean and freshwater ecosystems for future generations, including by advancing the protection of marine mammals. We stand ready to assist federal, state and other partners and want to be eligible for grant funding to advance the important work encompassed within H.R. 6987.

Anthropogenic underwater noise interferes with vital behaviors in marine mammals, such as communication, hunting and navigation. Lowering the volume is essential to a healthy, prosperous, and resilient marine ecosystem. H.R. 6987 advances critical programs to address underwater noise generated from commercial shipping, including by expanding NOAA's Ocean Noise Reference Station

Network to better measure and identify underwater noise hotspots. The Act also creates a new grant program within the Maritime Administration to promote research, development, and deployment of technologies that can effectively quiet vessels and uses existing Navy research to study how their quieting technologies can be applied to U.S. public vessels.

U.S. ports play a critical role in reducing the impacts of ship traffic and port operations on vulnerable marine mammals. H.R. 6987 would authorize competitive grants to assist U.S. ports to establish or expand programs that can reduce the risk of vessel collisions, minimize vessel disturbance of whales, and restore important habitats for marine mammals and their prey. Ports around the country, from Seattle to New York, have been taking steps to reduce pollution and protect marine wildlife, and this amendment would make these programs more accessible to U.S. ports.

Lastly, H.R. 6987 would support NOAA in using innovative new technologies, like autonomous vessels, passive acoustic monitoring devices and drones, to detect and provide alerts on the location of large whales, so that management measures can be adjusted in near-real time to reduce the risk of vessel collisions, entanglement with fishing gear, and adjust the timing of construction activities. The monitoring program would launch with a pilot focused on critically endangered North Atlantic right whales, which are suffering drastic and unsustainable declines due primarily to vessel strikes and gear entanglement. Once the monitoring program pilot proves successful, it would be expanded to other whale species and other regions as resources are made available.

While we strongly support all of these provisions, more can and must be done to reduce the impacts of vessels on vulnerable marine mammals. In particular, vessel collisions are a major threat to large whales, including in U.S. waters. On the east coast, these impacts are a primary factor driving critically endangered North Atlantic right whales to extinction and also cited as a cause for declaring a marine mammal unusual mortality event (UME) for humpback whales along the Atlantic coast. From 2016 to 2021, there have been 156 humpback whale strandings from Florida to Maine and a portion of these whales showed evidence of pre-mortem vessel strike. On the west coast, 57 stranded endangered whales had injuries consistent with vessel strikes between 2007 and 2019, according to the National Marine Fisheries Service; these likely represent a small percentage of actual strikes given that most collisions go undetected and large whales often sink after death rather than stranding. Decreasing ship speed has been proven to reduce the risk of whale fatalities while also reducing air pollution, carbon pollution, and vessel noise. Yet H.R. 6987 currently fails to address the risk of vessel strikes or put in place the proven solution of speed limits. Even if the other measures in the Act are successful, there will be an important gap between having the monitoring information, technology, and grants available for encouraging and facilitating changes in vessel operations, and actually realizing all of the potential reductions in noise and risk to whales at the scale that is needed; mandatory vessel slowdown areas and speed limits will fill this implementation gap. We urge the Committee to take action to address this omission.

The protections contained within H.R. 6987 will lead to a more successful co-existence between vulnerable whales and other marine life that are protected by U.S. law and the commercial maritime sector, which is a foundation of our nation's trade and economy. We urge you to advance this bill and to add language on vessel speed restrictions to reduce underwater noise and address the significant risk of vessel strikes.

Sincerely,

The Florida Aquarium
Tampa, Florida

The Maritime Aquarium at Norwalk
Norwalk, Connecticut

Mystic Aquarium
Mystic, Connecticut

National Aquarium
Baltimore, Maryland

New England Aquarium
Boston, Massachusetts

New York Aquarium
Brooklyn, New York

Omaha's Henry Doorly Zoo and Aquarium
Omaha, Nebraska

Oregon Coast Aquarium
Newport, Oregon

Seattle Aquarium
Seattle, Washington

Shedd Aquarium
Chicago, Illinois

Virginia Aquarium
Virginia Beach, Virginia