

**WRITTEN TESTIMONY OF
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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE**

**LEGISLATIVE HEARING ON
H.R. 897, H.R. 3925, H.R. 5441, and H.R. 6235**

**BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON WATER, WILDLIFE, AND FISHERIES
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES**

JANUARY 18, 2024

Chairman Bentz, Ranking Member Huffman, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on a number of bills. My name is Paul Scholz and I am the Deputy Assistant Administrator for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) National Ocean Service.

H.R.897 - Alabama Underwater Forest National Marine Sanctuary and Protection Act

NOAA's Office of National Marine Sanctuaries works with diverse communities of partners and stakeholders to conserve and facilitate sustainable use of America's most iconic ecosystems and cultural resources in the ocean and Great Lakes. These special places support thriving recreation, tourism, and commercial economies. Of the 15 sanctuaries currently in the National Marine Sanctuary System, 12 were administratively designated by NOAA pursuant to the National Marine Sanctuaries Act and 3 were designated by Congress through other legislation.

H.R. 897 would designate an area encompassing approximately ten square miles of ocean off the Alabama coast as a national marine sanctuary. The bill would charge NOAA with protecting and managing this area and its resources, which include a stand of submerged ancient cypress trees that were buried in sediment for tens of thousands of years until they were uncovered by Hurricane Ivan in 2004.

NOAA would welcome the opportunity to work with the Committee to ensure that all information is up to date and that the bill would enable NOAA to effectively conserve the area in accordance with congressional intent. The National Marine Sanctuary System relies upon appropriated funding to implement management, public engagement, and research programs for both new and existing sanctuaries. This site was not included in NOAA's estimates informing the development of the FY 2024 President's Budget. Fully funding NOAA's Sanctuaries and

Marine Protected Areas line item at the Fiscal Year 2024 President's Budget request of \$87 million would support the effective conservation of sites in the sanctuary system, which is contending with the management challenges of rapid environmental change overall.

H.R.3925 - Youth Coastal Fishing Program Act of 2023

The Youth Coastal Fishing Program Act of 2023 would establish a new grant program within NOAA to support youth coastal fishing projects across the country. Engaging young people and removing barriers to participation in marine and coastal recreational fishing are priorities for NOAA, as well as the outdoor recreation industry, and essential to ensuring the sustainability of this cherished American pastime. The bill would authorize \$2 million annually for 5 years to provide grants for youth fishing projects.

NOAA's updated 2023 National Saltwater Recreational Fishing Policy aims "to foster, support, and enhance a broadly accessible and diverse array of sustainable saltwater recreational and non-commercial fisheries for the benefit and enjoyment of the nation."

As drafted, the proposed grant program would allow grant recipients to use funds to reduce financial barriers for children to learn and experience the benefits of coastal fishing. NOAA, through the National Marine Fisheries Service and the Office of National Marine Sanctuaries, recently partnered with the National Park Trust to support underserved and military family fishing trips throughout our National Marine Sanctuary System. Additionally, NOAA participates in the Federal Interagency Council on Outdoor Recreation (FICOR) which is working across numerous federal agencies to create more safe, affordable, and equitable opportunities for Americans to get outdoors and has prioritized reducing barriers to access.

NOAA would like to note a concern on the timing required in the bill. The bill states that "1 year after the date of the enactment of this Act, the Secretary shall submit to Congress a report on (1) the eligible entities awarded grants under this section; (2) the amount each such entity received; (3) how those entities used the grant award; and (4) the number of participants in youth fishing projects funded by grants under this section." This would require NOAA to establish the grant program, request, review and approve applications and grant recipients to host all events, and report back all activities within a 12-month time frame. The 12-month deadline would be challenging to meet, particularly when most coastal recreational fishing occurs between late spring and early fall.

H.R.5441 - Long Island Sound Restoration and Stewardship Reauthorization Act of 2023

H.R. 5441 would amend the Clean Water Act to reauthorize certain Long Island Sound programs through 2028. The Environmental Protection Agency has primary responsibility for implementation of these programs. Although NOAA's National Ocean Service does not have a direct role in the implementation of the Act, Connecticut's Coastal Management Program and

National Estuarine Research Reserve coordinate with the EPA's Long Island Sound Study on research and planning projects.

H.R.6235 - Harmful Algal Bloom and Hypoxia Research and Control Amendments Act of 2023

Harmful algal blooms, or HABs, and hypoxic events are scientifically complex and economically damaging occurrences that threaten our nation's communities and ecosystems. Every U.S. state and territory now experiences some kind of HAB event, the most severe of which can lead to hospitalizations from toxin exposure, commercial fisheries closures, income loss for tourism businesses, cultural, social and subsistence impacts, and wildlife strandings. For example, a single 2018 red tide event off the coast of Florida resulted in \$318 million in tourism business losses, and a 2014 bloom in Lake Erie resulted in \$65 million in lost benefits, including recreation for Ohio residents, property values, and water treatment services.

H.R. 6235 would reauthorize and amend the Harmful Algal Bloom and Hypoxia Research and Control Act of 1998, also known as HABHRCA. HABHRCA provides authority for NOAA's role in researching, detecting, monitoring, and forecasting HABs and hypoxia in our oceans, coasts, and Great Lakes. In addition, the Act authorizes cutting-edge research into HAB prevention, control, and mitigation. NOAA's programs focused on HABs and hypoxia are national in scope, but tailored to diverse and specific regional needs, providing actionable information about HABs to help decision-makers protect human health, the seafood industry, and other coastal resources. NOAA's HABs information also supports meeting nutrient reduction goals of international agreements such as the U.S.-Canada Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement.

NOAA acknowledges that a major goal of H.R. 6235 is to improve coordination and cooperative efforts both across and within federal agencies, as well as to sustain and enhance monitoring and observation capabilities. Currently, NOAA co-leads the Interagency Working Group on HABHRCA and is a member of the Hypoxia Task Force. These groups are both highly effective in coordinating federal research activities, addressing mutual challenges, and producing legislatively-mandated progress reports. The legislation maintains NOAA's role as the lead agency for overall HABHRCA activities, and clarifies that the Environmental Protection Agency leads the freshwater aspects of program-wide duties, in collaboration with NOAA and the Interagency Working Group.

Conclusion

NOAA is proud to provide data, products, and services that protect our ecosystems and enhance the Nation's resilience to climate and other environmental change. We appreciate the Committee's attention to the issues addressed in these bills, and we look forward to continuing our work with you on enhancing our programs and partnerships. Thank you again for the opportunity to testify. I am happy to answer any questions.