

**Written Statement of Jeff Strong, President**

**Strongs Marine**

**June 27, 2024 legislative hearing**

**Before the House Natural Resources Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife and Fisheries**

**In support of H.R. 7925, the Modernizing Access to Our Public Oceans Act, and of H.R. 8704, To require the Secretary of Commerce to establish a grant program to foster enhanced coexistence between ocean users and North Atlantic right whales and other large cetacean species.**

Good morning, Chairman Bentz, Ranking Member Huffman, Congressman D’Esposito, and esteemed members of the Committee. Thank you for providing me with the opportunity to testify in support of the MAPOceans Act or H.R. 7925.

My name is Jeff Strong, and I am the President of Strongs Marine, a family-owned full service marine dealership and marina with locations throughout Long Island, where we are dedicated to fulfilling dreams by creating life-enhancing recreational possibilities, one family at a time. I also serve as the Chairman of the Board for the Marine Retailers Association of the Americas, a 501(c)6 dedicated to fueling marine dealer success, so it is safe to say that recreational boating is in my blood and a pastime I care about deeply. I thank Congressman D’Esposito and Congressman Levin for their leadership on H.R. 7925, as this bipartisan bill is a significant step towards enhancing the accessibility, safety, and enjoyment of our nation’s federal waterways.

In the United States, Recreational boating is a major economic driver and a crucial part of our nations \$1.1 trillion outdoor recreation economy. According to statistics from the National Marine Manufacturers Association, recreational boating alone annually contributes \$230.3 billion to our economy, supports more than 800,000 jobs and 36,000 businesses. Furthermore, the recreational boating industry is uniquely American, as 95% of all boats sold in the United States are American made and sold at family-owned small businesses just like Strongs Marine.

Throughout my 51 years in the recreational marine industry, I have seen firsthand the immense value that our coastal regions provide, not just as critical habitat but also as recreational spaces that foster communities and support local economies. The MAPOceans Act will address a pressing need for standardized, published, and accessible data relating to the public recreational use of our federal waterways. By digitizing this important information about these waterways, and fishing restrictions and regulations we are taking a critical step towards ensuring the safety and enjoyment of recreational boaters and anglers and the conservation of various sport-fish populations.

At Strong’s Marine we not only have marina facilities where experienced and new boaters alike keep their vessels, we also sell new and pre-owned boats and get people on the water for the very first time. Time and time again both new and experienced boaters alike come to members of my

staff, or even myself, with questions regarding navigation or need help finding and figuring out fisheries regulations and catch limits. While our staff and I are always pleased to work with our customers and teach them where to look to find this information, these constant needs by the boating public underscore the importance of the MAPOceans Act, as this important information will be made much more available and accessible, making it easier for the boating public to boat and fish safely, confidently, and in accordance with Federal fisheries regulations.

The Modernizing Access to Our Public Oceans Act is a vital piece of legislation that promises to enhance the safety, accessibility, and enjoyment of our nation's waterways. By providing standardized, up-to-date information, we are empowering recreational users to connect with nature responsibly and sustainably. I urge you to support this important initiative, which benefits our environment, our communities, and our economy.

In addition to the MAPOceans Act, I would like to offer my support of H.R. 8704, which would require the Secretary of Commerce to establish a grant program to foster enhanced coexistence between ocean users and North Atlantic right whales and other large cetacean species. In addition the reasons stated below, I believe this bill will also benefit from the MAPOceans Act's standardization and publication of accessible data on our federal waterways as a means to collect and disseminate near-real time information on the location of protected species such as the North Atlantic Right Whale so recreational boaters can avoid those areas and empower boaters who encounter a protected species to report their sighting to alert others in the area.

I would like to express my appreciation for the efforts of this Committee and the bill's sponsors, Mr. Carter of Georgia, and Mrs. Peltola of Alaska, in addressing the critical balance between whale conservation, human safety, and economic sustainability. Furthermore, I would like to reiterate something the entire recreational boating and fishing industry has worked to make clear and that is we all support the protection and restoration of this critically endangered animal. As an industry directly tied to the health of our nations oceans and freshwater resources, we understand better than most the importance of robust marine mammal populations for overall ocean ecosystem health, however, our community strives to find the means to provide for the recovery of this species while allowing for continued safe access to the waters off the Atlantic Coast. For that reason, I express my support for H.R. 8704 and again thank Representatives Carter and Peltola for their dedication to finding a balanced approach to the conservation of this key species.

As a marine retailer with 4 locations on the Atlantic Coast who sells and services boats above 35 feet and dock space for vessels of the same size category, I stand to be negatively impacted by the Proposed Amendments to the North Atlantic Right Whale Vessel Strike Rule and support the provisions laid out in H.R. 8704 as focusing on technological solutions strikes the right balance between conserving the endangered North Atlantic Right Whale and ensuring coastal communities and family run small businesses like Strongs Marine are not shuttered due the proposed expansions of the North Atlantic Right Whale Vessel Strike Reduction Rule.

In addition to failing to consider the potential of existing technologies to measurably reduce the risk of a vessel striking a North Atlantic Right Whale, NOAA also failed to complete a thorough and thoughtful economic impact analysis and completely missed the mark on how the proposed

rule would impact the recreational marine industry at large, and more specifically small marine retailers like me who stretch down the Atlantic Coast. The Initial Regulatory Flexibility Analysis done by the National Marine Fisheries Service found that the proposed rule would only have an economic impact of \$46 million per year, and only evaluated the number of “delayed transit hours” for impacted vessels. NMFS essentially cherry picked the single and likely smallest facet of the vast economic impact of the proposed rule, completely ignoring the impact to businesses like mine, and many other industries that are integral to the fabric of coastal communities along the Atlantic Seaboard. It is also worth noting that these concerns have been echoed by a variety of stakeholders, including the Small Business Administration office of Advocacy who stated in a letter to NMFS that they should “Consider all potential impacts to small businesses from the proposed rule, and to update its IRFA to better account for these small business impacts.” Despite these concerns being made during and after the public input period, no such work has been done to better understand the devastating impacts this rule stands to have on small-businesses and the recreational marine industry at large.

Furthermore, the Marine Retailers Association of the Americas recently surveyed 65 of their members to examine the negative impact the proposed rule would have on small businesses. Ultimately, the survey found that on average a marine retailer or broker typically sells just over 23 boats between the 35- and 65-foot range annually, and that the average revenue generated by boats in this size category is between \$3.7 million per year. Respondents also indicated an estimated average loss in revenue of \$3 million per business per year and a total loss of sales revenue of more than \$153.2 million. Additionally, the proposed rule will not just impact marine retailers and brokers’ ability to sell boats within and above the 35-65 size class, it will likely result in decreased revenues from servicing, provisioning, and the storage of these vessels. The survey also found that non-sales related losses would average \$1.1 million per year. It is important to note that this was a survey of just 65 members, and with almost 500 marine retailers on the East Coast, the full impact is estimated at just over \$2 billion.

While the aforementioned survey works to provide a clearer impact on marine retailers, I have been hearing first-hand from current and potential customers about the proposed rule, many feeling discouraged about buying a new vessel or upgrading to a larger size and concerned about the safety implications of traveling at only 10kts, or the speed of a bicycle. Furthermore, the recreational anglers in my marinas are also outraged by the proposed regulations, as they would simply make an offshore trip to the Canyons for tuna and other pelagic species impossible. It is not uncommon when traveling offshore for recreational angling to cover 200 miles or more, about the distance from New York to Washington D.C., now imagine having to cover that distance on a bicycle instead of in a car or train.

For my business and the entire recreational marine industry, nothing is more important than the safety of boaters on the water and technology is a key part of creating a safe and confident boater who can enjoy our shared waters while protecting endangered species like the North Atlantic Right Whale and the environment as a whole.

These foreseen and unintended impacts underscore the importance of H.R. 8704, as we need to work together on a solution that will better accomplish the goal of conserving the North Atlantic Right Whale, while simultaneously ensuring recreational boaters can continue to enjoy our

nations oceans and be stewards on the high seas. Furthermore, H.R. 8704 is focused on developing technological solutions that can be applied to all large cetaceans, and this will ultimately ensure that we foster an overall safer recreational boating experience for users and wildlife alike.

Again, I would like to thank the Chairman Bentz, Ranking Member Huffman, Representatives D'esposito, Levin, Carter, and Peltola for their work and focus on these important pieces of legislation. Together H.R. 7925 and H.R. 8704 will be crucial in furthering the ability of recreational anglers and boaters to be stewards of the Atlantic while ensuring the conservation sport fish populations, cetaceans.