

AN OPEN LETTER TO THE U.S. CONGRESS

We, the undersigned, are marine scientists deeply concerned by recent legislative proposals and executive actions that would undermine over a half-century of successful marine mammal conservation in the United States.

In 1972, Congress responded to strong public demand for the protection of marine mammals by passing the landmark Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) with overwhelming bipartisan support. Since that time, it has safeguarded some of America's most iconic species, from dolphins to manatees to whales. Alongside the Endangered Species Act (ESA), the MMPA has successfully prevented the disappearance of any American marine mammal population, both by prohibiting commercial hunting and by reducing the impacts of fisheries entanglements, vessel collisions, and harassment from industrial activities. Many populations have recovered or improved even as human use of our oceans has increased.

Alarming, the last Congress saw the introduction of more than a dozen bills and amendments—an unprecedented number—aimed at rolling back these fundamental protections. Among these legislative proposals were some that would prohibit measures to reduce vessel strikes on endangered whales; others that would prohibit or delay the designation of critical habitat under the ESA; and one that would nullify virtually every meaningful safeguard in one of the MMPA's core provisions, a provision that determines how the government authorizes and mitigates harm to whales, dolphins, and other species. Since the start of the new Congress in January, multiple proposals have already been introduced to weaken the ESA and MMPA, in part to preclude future action on marine mammal recovery.

Recent administrative actions are also undermining our ability to protect marine mammals. The mass firings at NOAA and the Fish and Wildlife Service have eliminated specialists in all parts of the country, some with decades of expertise on populations of regional and national significance. The John H. Prescott Marine Mammal Rescue Assistance Program is slated for suspension, undermining the nation's ability to respond to marine mammal strandings in practically every coastal region. The Office of Management and Budget has proposed sweeping cuts to marine conservation and science programs, including the zeroing-out of the U.S. Marine Mammal Commission, a vital expert advisory agency. And NOAA staff devoted to the recovery of transboundary populations have been barred from speaking with their foreign counterparts.

We believe these actions, individually and collectively, could set back marine mammal conservation in the United States by decades. That fate is certain if Congress adopts legislation to degrade the MMPA and ESA.

Marine mammals are not only a beloved part of our natural heritage, they also support coastal economies through tourism worth billions of dollars, and they help maintain essential ecosystem services that sustain life in the sea. The MMPA and ESA allow for best available science on marine mammals to be incorporated into permitting processes, enabling activities to go forward while protecting vulnerable and iconic species. To weaken these world-leading laws would make it far more likely that endangered populations will fail to recover and that others will become endangered in the future.

As marine scientists, we urge Congress to uphold the integrity of the MMPA and ESA. These laws are essential to ensuring the health of marine mammals and of our oceans, to helping our coastal communities thrive, and to meeting our responsibility to future generations.

Respectfully,

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