NATIONAL AQUARIUM®

501 East Pratt Street
Baltimore, Maryland
21202-3194

P: 410-576-3800
**aqua.org**

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United States House Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Water, Oceans and Wildlife Legislative Hearing
National Aquarium Testimony in Support of H.R. 7918

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, and members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony in support of H.R. 7918, the Sea Turtle Rescue Assistance Act of 2022. The National Aquarium appreciates Representative William Keating and Representative Jenniffer González-Colón for their leadership on this important legislation.

## Sea Turtle Rescue and Rehabilitation at the National Aquarium

With a mission to inspire conservation of the world's aquatic treasures, the National Aquarium connects people with nature to inspire conservation action. Our work begins within the walls of our aquarium, but is not constrained to Baltimore, Maryland, or the Chesapeake Bay watershed. The National Aquarium is the only organization in Maryland permitted by the federal government to respond to live-stranded marine mammals and sea turtles along the state's more than 3,000 miles of coastline, which is highly fragmented and results in a response area of more than 6,000 square miles, making stranding response logistically challenging and resource intensive. Since 1991, we have worked with federal and state agency partners and our regional stranding network to rehabilitate and release Kemp's ridley, green and loggerhead sea turtles. This work has provided hundreds of staff and volunteers an up-close perspective on the challenges facing protected marine animals like sea turtles—and those who care for them.

All seven species of sea turtles found in U.S. waters are listed as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). To help advance sea turtle conservation and recovery, every sea turtle species recovery plan required by the ESA and developed jointly by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and NOAA Fisheries identifies the need to maintain an active sea turtle stranding network. NOAA coordinates the Sea Turtle Stranding and Salvage Network (STSSN) – currently comprised of at least 53 permitted facilities across 17 states and 2 US territories that respond to and/or rehabilitate stranded sea turtles, collect scientific data, educate the public about sea turtles, and otherwise help agencies to meet

their protected species mandates. Organizations throughout the STSSN are facing increasing demands to perform this important work.

All sea turtle species face several anthropogenic threats that can contribute to them stranding, including fishing gear entanglements, boat strikes, and plastic waste entanglement/ingestion. Sea turtles can also strand if they become cold stunned. When exposed to cold water temperatures, they can become too lethargic and weak to swim, and wash ashore. Cold stun events in the northwest Atlantic are increasing, driven in part by warming sea surface temperatures. Data from Mass Audubon[1] shows the number of cold-stunned sea turtles found on the shores of Cape Cod Bay has increased over the past 10 years. Hundreds of sea turtles now strand there every year, in comparison to the few dozen typically found in the 1970s and 1980s. Most of these cold stun strandings are Kemp's ridleys, although loggerhead and green turtles are also becoming more commonly stranded species in the area.

The National Aquarium works with multiple stranding network organizations along the Eastern seaboard, admitting to our rehab facilities many sea turtle patients that were found cold-stunned on the beaches of Cape Cod. Because of rapidly changing water temperatures and wind patterns, sea turtles often cannot escape the hook-like area of Cape Cod Bay before becoming hypothermic. Each year beginning around October, sea turtle stranding network partner staff and volunteers begin to monitor beaches around Cape Cod Bay for stranded, hypothermic turtles that are then transported to the New England Aquarium's Sea Turtle Hospital. The turtles are triaged and treated for life-threatening conditions, including pneumonia and dehydration. Once the turtles are stabilized, veterinarians examine animals that need further care before they can be released back into the wild, and clear others for travel to partner facilities, including National Aquarium, to continue rehabilitation.

Most of the sea turtles that the National Aquarium has rehabilitated and released have been critically endangered Kemp's ridley sea turtles. While we have done this work for three decades, more than half of the turtles we have treated have come to us in the last eight years, primarily cold stunned Kemp's ridley turtles stranded off Massachusetts.

### Inadequate Federal Support

Despite the high costs associated with sea turtle stranding response and rehabilitation, and increasing demands on stranding network organizations, there is currently inadequate federal support, and no funding program that is directly available to permitted organizations that rescue and rehabilitate endangered sea turtles. In recent years, the National Aquarium has spent an average of approximately $500,000 per year on related direct and indirect expenses, including staff time, facility costs related to housing sea turtle patients, transport, veterinary care, medical supplies, necropsies, and other relevant expenses. The National Aquarium and South Carolina Aquarium surveyed six other institutions permitted for this work and found that over a recent two-year period our eight organizations cared for nearly

[1] Mass Audubon Wellfleet Bay Wildlife Sanctuary program page. https://www.massaudubon.org/get-outdoors/wildlife-sanctuaries/wellfleet-bay/about/our-conservation-work/sea-turtles

2,000 sea turtles and collectively spent approximately $5 million each year, with a median spending of $430,000 per facility.

The level of voluntary contributions by stranding network organizations is not sustainable, yet currently no program exists for all our facilities to seek direct federal support. This funding gap is acknowledged by all partners who participate in sea turtle stranding response and rehabilitation, including NOAA and USFWS, yet no solution has been enacted. Direct grant programs exist for other species, specifically marine mammals. The National Aquarium is one of many institutions who respond to and rehabilitate stranded marine mammals, in addition to sea turtles. The federal government has a long standing and successful grant program created by Congress to provide direct support to institutions that respond to and rehabilitate marine mammals: the John H. Prescott Marine Mammal Assistance Grant Program. Since 2001, the Prescott Grant has provided nearly $70 million to support organizations that respond to and rehabilitate marine mammals, and the National Aquarium has been a grateful recipient of Prescott grant awards. However, despite organizations performing nearly identical work to respond to and rehabilitate critically endangered sea turtles, there is no direct grant program to support sea turtle stranding response and rehabilitation.

There is also a misconception that the Prescott Grant covers sea turtles or that a similar grant program already exists for sea turtles. Neither is the case. Furthermore, the Species Recovery Grants authorized under ESA Section 6 are not available as direct support to institutions, rather only to States for sea turtle species covered by a State's cooperative agreement. The result is much needed support does not make its way through Section 6 grants to the many organizations working on the ground to respond to and care for sea turtles. The same is true for several other bills recently passed or currently being debated in Congress that provide funding for endangered species conservation: nothing addresses the need to directly support institutions responding to and caring for sea turtles. Meanwhile, emergency funding has been made available in response to certain large sea turtle stranding events but does not address the ongoing and increasing need to support this work.

### Sea Turtle Rescue Assistance Act

The Sea Turtle Rescue Assistance Act of 2022 will create a federal grant program to support the rescue, recovery, and treatment of stranded sea turtles, along with collection of data from stranded sea turtles for scientific research. If passed, this bill will allow organizations to apply for direct funding to support this important work. While sea turtle conservation is led jointly under a memorandum of understanding between NOAA and USFWS, NOAA coordinates the stranding network and has the sea turtle expertise required to run this program along with years of experience administering the Prescott Grant Program. This bill's program authorization level of $5 million is based on current relevant costs estimates that match the total annual amount spent on sea turtle rescue and rehabilitation by just eight permitted stranding network partners. This authorization amount is likely to be quickly and fully subscribed.

The current global pandemic has only exacerbated the challenges of sea turtle rescue and rehabilitation and the lack of federal support directly available to our institutions. More than three dozen members of Congress from both sides of the aisle have already endorsed calls that direct funding be made available to organizations permitted for sea turtle stranding response and rehabilitation, and in the last month 46 organizations from 24 states and territories have collectively urged Congress to pass the bipartisan Sea Turtle Rescue Assistance Act. Additionally, the final FY 2022 federal budget acknowledged this crucial funding gap and encouraged NOAA to provide direct support to organizations who provide sea turtle stranding response and/or rehabilitation. However, without additional funding, NOAA will be unable to meet this urgent need.

Unfortunately, sea turtle strandings, and the associated costs of rescue and rehabilitation, are likely to continue to increase in the years ahead. For instance, experts predict more than 2,300 Kemp's ridley turtles could cold stun annually by 2031 as sea surface temperatures continue to increase within the Gulf of Maine[2] – or roughly double the previous largest cold stun event on record for that body of water in 2014. Without direct, sustained federal funding to sea turtle stranding network organizations, the stranding network's ability to respond to and care for the increasing number of sea turtle strandings will be greatly diminished.

It is time for Congress to adequately support the dozens of institutions who have voluntarily helped the federal government fulfill their protected species mandates under the ESA to conserve and recover sea turtle species. Our organizations cannot continue to shoulder the increasing cost of responding to and caring for sick and injured sea turtles. Just as Congress acknowledged their obligation to support organizations that respond to and care for stranded marine mammals by creating the Prescott Grant Program, we respectfully request Congress acknowledge the need to support sea turtle stranding network organizations by passing the Sea Turtle Rescue Assistance Act.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Driban
Chief Mission Officer

[2] Griffin et al. (2019) Warming seas increase cold-stunning events for Kemp's ridley sea turtles in the northwest Atlantic. PLoS ONE 14 (1). https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0211503