July 25, 2017

The Honorable Wilbur Ross
Secretary
Department of Commerce
1401 Constitution Avenue
Washington, DC 20230

Dear Secretary Ross,

We are writing in strong support of the 11 National Marine Sanctuaries and Marine National Monuments under review as part of Executive Order 13795, “Implementing an America-First Offshore Energy Strategy.”

National marine sanctuaries and marine national monuments, designated through the National Marine Sanctuaries Act and the Antiquities Act, are critical in keeping our oceans healthy and productive. These protected areas reduce the impacts of human activities on marine ecosystems, protect rare and endangered species, increase the productivity of surrounding fisheries, and help maintain local cultures, economies, and livelihoods that depend on the marine environment.

Protecting our oceans and Great Lakes also provides economic benefits. Across all National Marine Sanctuaries, about $8 billion annually is generated in coastal and ocean economies from recreation, tourism, fishing, and research.1 Almost one third of all commercial fish catch in California comes from national marine sanctuaries, contributing nearly $330 million in economic impacts and 1,840 jobs across 15 counties.2 In tourism and recreation, visitors to the Greater Farallones generated $145 million in economic impacts and 1,100 jobs in 2011;3 in Thunder Bay National Marine Sanctuary, visitors generated $92 million in economic impacts and 1,700 jobs in an adjacent tri-county area in 2005.4 All of these examples come from national marine sanctuaries that are under review.

The wealth of benefits from protected sanctuaries and monuments far outweigh any potential benefits of expanding oil and gas development off our coasts. The impacts of seismic testing alone can severely impact marine life ranging from whales and seals to the tiny zooplankton5 at the base of ocean food webs. The most significant concern is that any offshore oil and gas development will always put coastal communities and marine ecosystems at risk of a devastating oil spill; we saw the consequences decades ago in southern California and just a few years ago in the Gulf of Mexico.

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2 http://sanctuaries.noaa.gov/science/conservation/ca_fullreport.html
4 http://sanctuaries.noaa.gov/science/socioeconomic/factsheets/thunderbay.html
Protecting certain areas from extractive activities makes sense both environmentally and economically. As of June 2017, there are already 16.1 million acres of offshore waters under federal oil and gas leases, but the vast majority (73%) are not producing. Despite these numbers, offshore oil production has increased since 2007; it is clear we don’t need to take from every portion of our oceans and coasts to maintain a healthy energy economy. Instead, maintaining a diversity of uses and ocean spaces ensures that these vital ecosystems can provide benefits for all Americans.

National marine sanctuaries and marine national monuments protect ecologically and culturally unique places across our nation’s public waters and were designated to sustain these places for future generations. From the underwater mountains and ancient deepwater corals of the Northeast Canyons and Seamounts Marine National Monument to the sacred sites in Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument, these ocean spaces are as important to our country’s natural heritage as any of our iconic national parks and monuments on land, and we urge you to maintain strong protections for them.

Sincerely,

Raúl M. Grijalva
Ranking Member
House Committee on Natural Resources

Jared Huffman
Vice Ranking Member
House Committee on Natural Resources

Alan Lowenthal
Member of Congress

John Yarmuth
Member of Congress

Donald M. Payne, Jr.
Member of Congress

Salud Carbajal
Member of Congress

Alma Adams
Member of Congress

Jimmy Panetta
Member of Congress

Mike Thompson
Member of Congress

Ted W. Lieu
Member of Congress

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6 https://www.boem.gov/2017-06-01-Combined-Lease-Report-for-June/
7 https://www.data.bsee.gov/Production/OCSProduction/Default.aspx
Lisa Blunt Rochester
Member of Congress