Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council
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Michael P. Luisi, Chairman | G. Warren Elliott, Vice Chairman
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March 9, 2018

Ms. Kelly Hammerle
National OCS Oil and Gas Leasing Program Manager
Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM)
45600 Woodland Road
Mailstop VAM-LD Sterling, VA 20166-9216

Dear Ms. Hammerle,

Please accept these comments from the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council (Council) on the development of a New National Outer Continental Shelf (OCS) Oil and Gas Leasing Program for 2019-2024.

The Council manages more than 64 marine species with 7 fishery management plans (FMPs)[1] in federal waters and is composed of members from the coastal states of New York to North Carolina (including Pennsylvania). Marine fisheries are profoundly important to the social and economic well-being of Mid-Atlantic communities and provide numerous benefits to the nation, including domestic food security. In 2015, the commercial seafood industry in the Mid-Atlantic region supported 100,954 jobs, $13.9 billion in sales, $3.2 billion in income, and $5.1 billion in value added impacts across the Mid-Atlantic.[2] Commercial fishermen landed 648 million pounds of finfish and shellfish, earning $512 million in landings revenue, while 2.0 million recreational anglers took 12.4 million fishing trips and spent nearly $3.5 billion on trip and equipment expenditures.[2]

The Council manages its fisheries throughout their range and develops fishery management plans to achieve its vision of "Healthy and productive marine ecosystems supporting thriving, sustainable marine fisheries that provide the greatest overall benefit to stakeholders." This includes actions to conserve fish habitat, protect deep sea corals, and manage forage fisheries sustainably. The fisheries for the Council's managed species are prosecuted in the Northeast exclusive economic zone and are within several of BOEM's oil and gas leasing areas. Given the importance of these fisheries, the

[1] Fourteen species are directly managed with specific FMPs. These include summer flounder, scup, black sea bass, Atlantic bluefish, Atlantic mackerel, *Illex* and longfin squids, butterfish, Atlantic surfclams, ocean quahogs, golden and blueline tilefish, spiny dogfish (joint with the New England Council), and monkfish (joint with the New England Council). In addition, more than 50 forage species are managed as "ecosystem components" in all seven FMPs. The Council sets possession and landing limits to prevent the expansion of directed fisheries on these forage species in the Mid-Atlantic.

[2] National Marine Fisheries Service. 2017. Fisheries Economics of the United States, 2015. U.S. Dept. Commerce, NOAA Tech. Memo. NMFS-F/SPO-170, 247p. Available at: http://www.st.nmfs.noaa.gov/Assets/economics/publications/FEUS/FEUS-2015/Report-Chapters/FEUS%202015-AllChapters_Final.pdf.

Council supports U.S. energy development that sustains the health of the marine ecosystem and associated fishery resources while minimizing environmental risks. The environmental risks associated with offshore oil and gas development are not consistent with the Council's vision for a healthy and productive marine ecosystem.

In fact, just the increased propagation of sound from geologic and geophysical activities, including seismic surveys and increased vessel traffic to transport oil, can impact fish and other living marine resources that depend on sound for their most vital life functions. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Ocean Noise Strategy Roadmap[3] recognizes that "sound is a fundamental component of the physical and biological habitat that many aquatic animals and ecosystems have evolved to rely on over millions of years." The strategy also notes that changes in the acoustic environment caused by human activities "can lead to reduced ability to detect and interpret acoustic cues that animals use to select mates, find food, maintain group structure and relationships, avoid predators, navigate, and perform other critical life functions." For example, a study recently published in *Nature* showed that air guns cause significant mortality to zooplankton populations, even > 1 km from the seismic source.[4] Since zooplankton are a part of the food chain base, this new study suggest these activities could have profound negative impacts on our marine resources and the millions of Americans who benefit from them.

Although oil and gas development has been largely focused on potential offshore lease areas, the Council is also concerned that impacts of development would not be local or even regional. From the potential expansion of nearshore receiving facilities, the installation of underwater oil pipelines, to the increased sound associated with vessel traffic, the impacts of offshore oil development will have broad and cascading effects on the marine environment from our shorelines to farthest reaches of the Atlantic OCS. In addition, the risk of chronic leaks or catastrophic discharge events from oil and gas extraction and transport have the potential to cause long-term adverse effects on marine ecosystems, and cascading effects on human activities that would jeopardize both vulnerable species and fishing industries, as well as coastal tourism opportunities.

In addition, some of the region's most sensitive habitats, which the Council has worked to protect from the impacts of fishing, would be at risk. The Frank R. Lautenberg Deep Sea Coral Protection Area (Map 1), an area the size of Virginia encompassing more than 38,000 square miles of federal waters off the Mid-Atlantic coast, restricts fishing activity to protect slow-growing, fragile deep sea corals from the impacts of fishing gear.

These canyons contain sensitive deep sea corals, function as habitat areas of concern for golden tilefish, and have unique biological and oceanographic features making them both ecologically and economically important to the marine environment and our fishermen.

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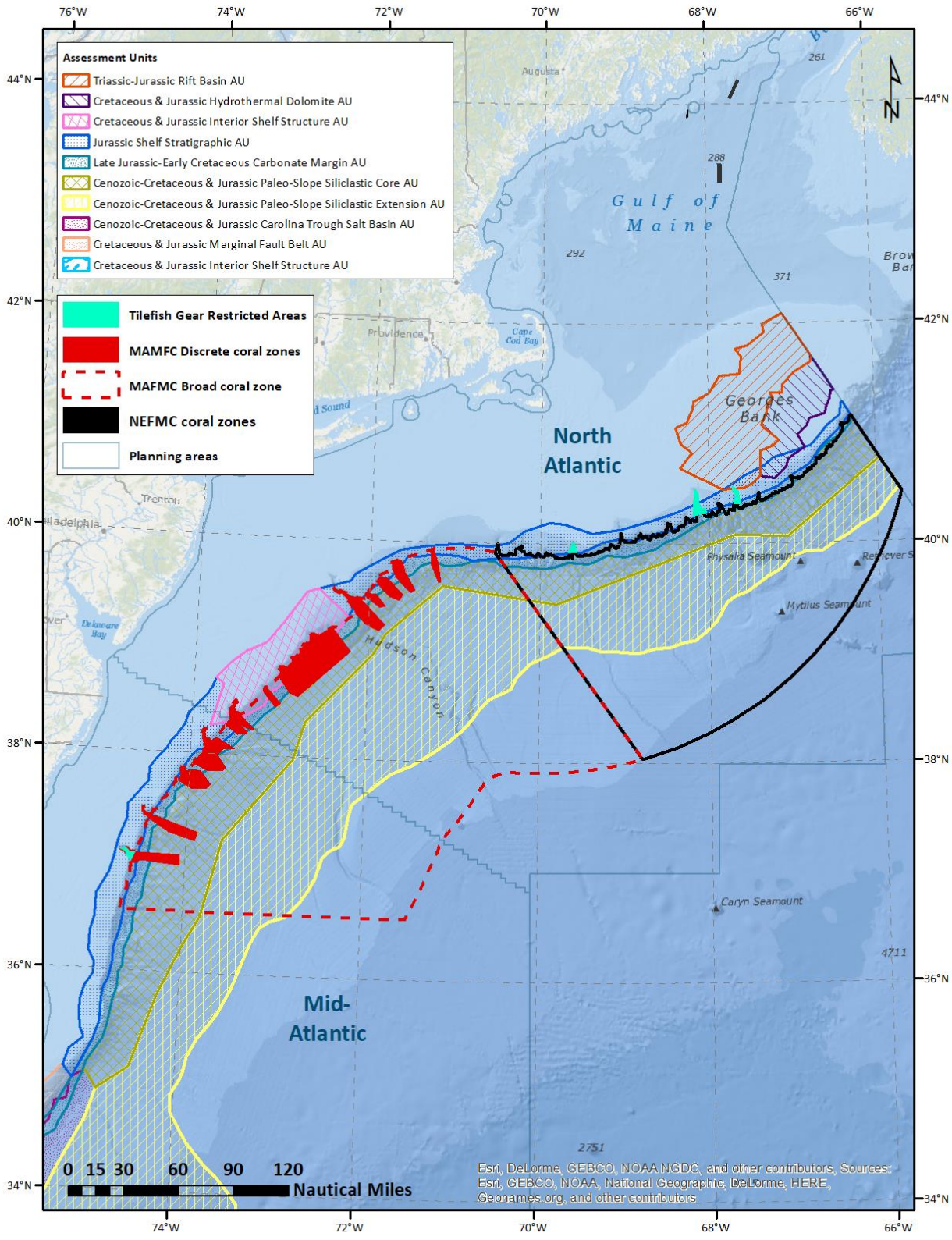
[3] Available at: http://cetsound.noaa.gov/Assets/cetsound/documents/Roadmap/ONS_Roadmap_Final_Complete.pdf.

[4] McCauley, R.D., R.D. Day, K.M. Swadling, Q.P. Fitzgibbon, R.A. Watson, and J.M. Semmens. 2017. Widely used marine seismic survey air gun operations negatively impact zooplankton. *Nature* Ecology & Evolution 1. Doi: 10.1038/s41559-017-0195. Available at: https://www.nature.com/articles/s41559-017-0195.

Map 1 – Mid-Atlantic and New-England Council Coral Zones and Tilefish Gear Restricted Areas.



In sum, although the Council recognizes the importance of energy exploration to U.S. economic security, the Council also notes the Mid-Atlantic is rich in marine biodiversity and contains ecologically sensitive areas that are highly important to the social, economic, and cultural currency of the region. The potential for substantial impacts to regional fishermen, fish, marine mammals, benthic communities, and ecosystem structure and function from exploration and development is great. As such, the Council does not support oil and gas development in our region and along the Atlantic coast.

The Council's Policy on Offshore Oil (attached) should be considered with these comments and can also be found at: http://www.mafmc.org/habitat/.

Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Dr. Christopher M. Moore
Executive Director, Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council

cc: J. Coakley, W. Cruikshank, W. Elliott, M. Luisi, C. Oliver