

Dear Members of Congress:

The National Marine Sanctuary System is our essential network of over 620,000 square miles of protected waters held in trust for all Americans. National marine sanctuaries conserve nationally significant natural, historic, and cultural resources and promote access for exploration and world-class outdoor recreation. Sanctuaries and marine protected areas are vital to maintaining healthy ocean and Great Lakes ecosystems that underpin our productive coastal economies. They protect ecologically and biologically significant habitats and increase resilience to the impacts of climate change. Sanctuaries also protect shipwrecks, sacred heritage sites, and other maritime heritage and cultural resources that tell the stories of America's history.

National marine sanctuaries promote visitation, bolster tourism and robust recreational industries, and drive the growth of the blue economy by balancing protection with compatible use. Sanctuaries generate billions annually in local economies and support numerous jobs and businesses in the fishing, tourism, recreation, and scientific research sectors. They are living laboratories to strengthen cooperative science and research to improve management, build resilience, and advance innovative public-private partnerships and outdoor classrooms that connect communities to their marine and Great Lakes wonders through education and outreach programs.

For FY 2024, we strongly urge Congress to:

- Provide at least \$87 million for Sanctuaries and Marine Protected Areas, within the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) Operations, Research, and Facilities (ORF) account; and,
- Provide at least \$8.5 million for Marine Sanctuaries Construction, within NOAA's Procurement, Acquisition, and Construction (PAC) account.
- Direct NOAA to prioritize conservation, education, mapping, and research efforts across the agency in the National Marine Sanctuary System.
- Cap NOAA and the National Ocean Service corporate fees to no more than 5 percent of the annual appropriations.

The ocean is central to mitigating climate change; it has absorbed 90 percent of the climate system's excess heat. Climate change is disproportionately impacting the ocean, causing changes in water temperature, ocean acidification, and deoxygenation, which changes ocean circulation and chemistry, raises sea levels, increases storm intensity, and changes the diversity and abundance of marine species. These impacts threaten the physical well-being, economic prosperity, and food security of communities along our coasts and businesses that rely on marine resources and transportation. National marine sanctuaries are a key part of the solution to ocean climate impacts. They protect coastal and marine ecosystems that remove atmospheric carbon and store it in marine sediments and habitats, safeguard coastal communities from flooding and storms and reduce non-climate stressors to support ecosystem resilience.

Communities across the Nation can nominate their most treasured places in marine and Great Lakes waters for consideration as national marine sanctuaries. Engaging communities as stewards of these protected waters make sanctuaries unique and provides a comprehensive, highly participatory approach to managing and conserving marine ecosystems and the Great Lakes for current and future generations. Recent sanctuary designations, nominations, and

expansions are the result of passionate individuals and widespread community interest in conserving our ocean, coasts, and Great Lakes.

For sanctuary Operations, Research and Facilities (ORF) funding, we urge Congress to provide at least \$87 million. ONMS manages more ocean and Great Lakes area than the entire National Park Service on a significantly lower budget. Based on FY21 funding, ONMS spends on average \$0.14/acre to support management, scientific research, and education in marine sanctuaries and two marine monuments. For comparison, the National Park Service spends an average of \$29.76/acre for units in the National Park System, the NOAA Office of Coastal Management spends an average \$28.08/acre estuaries in the National Estuarine Research Reserve System, and the Fish and Wildlife Service spends on average \$25.01/acre for refuges in the National Wildlife Refuge System. ONMS's budget is acutely under-resourced compared to its mission and in comparison to other natural resource management agencies ONMS needs the resources necessary to conduct scientific research, effectively manage sanctuaries and designate new ones, enforce regulations, and engage the public in stewardship.

The requested increase is an investment in the growing number of communities seeking to expand sanctuaries or nominate and designate new ones and to increase funds for science, management and public outreach at existing sanctuaries and monuments. There are four sites currently undergoing the sanctuary designation process and three sites nominated for designation in the inventory awaiting action. These sites all have strong community-based support. Increased funding would help support the completion of the proposed Chumash Heritage, Lake Ontario, Papahānaumokuākea, and Hudson Canyon sanctuary designations.

For sanctuary Procurement, Acquisition, and Construction (PAC) funding, we propose at least \$8.5 million. This funding will support replacement or repair of vessels that are critical to ONMS's mission. ONMS maintains a fleet of small boats that allow managers and partners to assess, monitor, research, and protect marine sanctuaries. These efforts include responding to entangled whales, conducting scientific missions, maintaining mooring buoys, testing new technologies and tools, and enforcing regulations. To continue on-the-water science and conservation programs that strengthen the management of our ocean and Great Lakes, investment in recapitalizing aging vessels across the National Marine Sanctuary System in addition to upgrades, retrofits, and life-cycle extensions is critical. Funding would also support improvements for visitor centers, facilities and signage, and ADA compliance that anchor tourism and recreation in communities and enhance equitable access to nature.

We appreciate Congress recognizing the importance of sanctuaries and including report language in the FY23 Consolidated Appropriations Act directing NOAA to prioritize conservation, education, mapping and research efforts across the agency in the National Marine Sanctuary system. We urge Congress to continue to include this report language.

We are currently celebrating the 50th anniversary of the National Marine Sanctuaries Act. This is an opportunity to invest in America's waters, and the communities and businesses that depend upon them. Robust funding will ensure sound management of these treasured places through community stewardship; support of mission critical tools, like small boats; active restoration of marine environments; preservation of maritime resources; and improved understanding of marine and Great Lakes ecosystems.

We strongly urge you to invest in America's community-based national marine sanctuaries by supporting the Office of National Marine Sanctuaries at no less than \$95.5 million in FY 2024. Your support for marine sanctuaries will send a powerful message about the benefits of a healthy ocean and Great Lakes and underscore the continuing ecological, economic, and historical value of America's underwater national treasures. We thank you for your consideration of this request.

Sincerely,