

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 to exploration and world-class outdoor recreation, increasing access to nature for all. National marine sanctuaries are sources for solutions. They are living laboratories, outdoor classrooms, tourism and recreation destinations, blue carbon sinks, biodiversity safe havens, sacred sites and heritage landmarks, sources of inspiration, and centers of maritime commerce.

Recognizing the value that sanctuaries bring and seeing the success of the current National Marine Sanctuary System, communities across the country continue to engage in nominating and designating their most treasured places in marine and Great Lakes waters as national marine sanctuaries. There are currently six new community-based national marine sanctuaries in our Atlantic, Pacific, and Great Lakes waters undergoing the public sanctuary designation process. Providing increasing and robust funding to the Office of National Marine Sanctuaries is an investment in the growing communities both existing and in designation to ensure public engagement and public-private partnerships that are the hallmark of sanctuaries.

For Fiscal Year (FY) 2025 we strongly urge Congress to support the Office of National Marine Sanctuaries at no less than \$115 million. We respectfully request that you:

- Provide at least \$106.5 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.

Engaging communities as stewards of these protected waters makes sanctuaries unique and provides a comprehensive, highly participatory approach to managing and conserving marine ecosystems and the Great Lakes for current and future generations. Public participation is a hallmark of sanctuaries and underscores their dedication to civic engagement and leadership. From nomination to day-to-day, communities are at the core of national marine sanctuaries. NOAA tailors each sanctuary's management plan to the specific goals of each national marine sanctuary, which in turn reflects the unique resources and needs of each sanctuary's respective community. Decisions about how to best manage each of these special places continue to be made using the best available scientific data, as well as extensive public input, including through Sanctuary Advisory Councils, community-based advisory groups established to provide advice and recommendations to superintendents. With additional funding, NOAA will increase engagement with communities of color, underrepresented groups, and Indigenous and native peoples, in conservation, planning, and outreach across the system.

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. According to the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA), the marine economy accounted for \$432 billion of US gross domestic product in 2021, with a 7.4% growth over 2020 that outpaced the national economy. Tourism and recreation accounted for the most significant portion, \$153 billion of the gross output. Marine living resources, a sector that depends on a healthy ocean, accounted for \$18 billion in gross output.

The National Marine Sanctuary Program has a prestigious history of science and research expeditions, including a half-century of new discoveries – such as shipwrecks, artifacts, species, habitats, and natural processes – that inspire, amaze, and awe. Sanctuaries act as living laboratories for stewardship, education, restoration, and science to address climate impacts. Climate change is disproportionately impacting the ocean. It is causing changes in water temperature, ocean acidification, and deoxygenation, 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 weaken marine ecosystems' ability to provide critical ecological services and natural infrastructure for climate resilience. National marine sanctuaries 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. Scientists across NOAA are increasing our understanding of the climate drivers, conditions, trends, and predictions affecting our ocean through research conducted in sanctuaries.

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. Increased PAC funding would support the replacement or repair of vessels and allow managers and partners to better assess, monitor, research and protect national marine sanctuaries. These efforts include responding to entangled whales, conducting scientific missions, maintaining mooring buoys, testing new technologies and tools, and enforcing regulations. 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.

National marine sanctuaries connect people and communities through science, education, U.S. history, recreation, and stewardship and inspire community-based solutions that help individuals understand and protect the spectacular underwater habitats, wildlife, archaeological resources, and cultural seascapes of the United States. 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. Funds will allow NOAA to strengthen its research, monitoring, restoration, permitting, community engagement, and interagency partnerships, better informing NOAA's locally-driven management decisions, and advance designation and protection efforts for the 6 proposed national marine sanctuaries.

We strongly encourage you to invest in America's community-based national marine sanctuaries by supporting the Office of National Marine Sanctuaries at no less than \$115 million in Fiscal Year 2025. 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,