



8455 Colesville Road, Suite 1275 | Silver Spring, MD 20910

January 31, 2025

Dear Members of Congress,

We write to express our deep concerns and opposition to The Undersea Cable Protection Act (H.R. 261), which would circumvent the rights granted to communities by the National Marine Sanctuaries Act (NMSA).

H.R. 261 would amend the NMSA and remove the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) authority to issue permits for undersea fiber optic cables that traverse through national marine sanctuaries. The National Marine Sanctuary System is our network of over 629,000 square miles of protected waters held in trust for all Americans by NOAA. The National Marine Sanctuary System conserves some of the Nation's most critical natural, historic, and cultural resources. Sanctuaries are home to millions of species, preserve our nation's maritime and cultural heritage, and promote public access for exploration and world-class outdoor recreation and enjoyment. Sanctuaries capture the spirit of communities through public participatory conservation. Communities across the Nation can nominate their most treasured places in marine and Great Lakes waters to be national marine sanctuaries. Sanctuaries are managed with extensive public engagement and with local citizen participation.

The American people have entrusted NOAA, the agency with the scientific expertise on ocean and coastal management, to manage and conserve these special places. NOAA has been the agency to ensure the proper comprehensive assessment and public engagement that provides scientific integrity and centers our underwater national treasures and healthy communities. It has required accountability through monitoring and evaluation. Removing NOAA's authority here sets a bad precedent.

The NMSA is a community-centered, comprehensive, ecosystem-based law that ensures scientific integrity and community voice are part of decision making for nationally significant treasures in our public waters. In so, it provides a tested and successful framework for exploring potential activity, like cabling, to balance those economic activities with conserving places as iconic as our national parks, maritime heritage and cultural sites that tell the story of our nation, and majestic wildlife. The NMSA also addresses national security jointly among NOAA, the Department of Defense, and the Department of Homeland Security, upholding the promise that the American people will be engaged, to assess potential impacts to their communities, and to put into place monitoring safeguards, accountability, and transparency.



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National marine sanctuaries generate more than \$8 billion annually, support tens of thousands of jobs, promote visitation, and bolster tourism and robust recreational industries by balancing protection with compatible use. Sanctuaries partner with commercial and recreational fishermen, businesses, charters, and education partners to connect families and youth to our ocean and Great Lakes through activities such as the sport of recreational saltwater fishing, fostering a sense of stewardship and responsibility for America's great outdoors. The NMSA puts these national treasures and our communities first rather than considering them barriers to economic development of our ocean, coasts, and Great Lakes. We must ensure that the American People have a voice in their waters.

Currently, a company that wishes to place a cable in a sanctuary must pay a fee. These fees go back to the management of sanctuaries. The proposed legislation is attempting to allow cabling companies with special interests to circumvent paying permit fees for using nationally celebrated treasures held in trust for the American people. This means these special interest groups would not be paying their fair share while anyone else conducting an activity that could impact sanctuary resources would still be required to pay these fees. These fees are critical to the management and protection of our nation's marine historical and natural resources and are the standard process for industries using public resources on public lands and waters.

We urge Congress to maintain the ability of the National Marine Sanctuaries Act to provide the public with the tools needed to maintain the healthy balance between protection and commercial uses. We must ensure that the American people, from local dive operators and commercial and recreational fishermen to outdoor adventurers and families, continue to have a say in how these public resources are treated, rather than be silenced by special interest groups.

Sincerely,