Committee on Natural Resources
1324 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chair Westerman and Ranking Member Huffman,

We write to express strong opposition to Representative Begich's proposed draft bill to amend the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) of 1972. This legislation would roll back the foundational safeguards that have protected marine mammal populations for over 50 years. It threatens to undermine ocean health, reverse decades of conservation success, and harm the coastal economies that depend on productive, resilient marine ecosystems.

The MMPA has long served as a model for science-based conservation policy. It has protected whales, dolphins, manatees, and other marine mammals from decline, helped stabilize food webs, and sustained ecosystem services vital to human communities. Healthy marine ecosystems regulate weather patterns, store carbon, support commercial fisheries, and generate billions in tourism revenue, especially through wildlife-watching [1, 2, 3].

Marine mammals are keystone species and critical indicators of ocean health [4, 5]. Their behaviors help maintain ecosystem balance through nutrient cycling, prey regulation, and species distribution. Their presence signals a functioning marine environment; their decline warns of ecosystem distress [6, 7].

The proposed draft bill introduces a vague and permissive "negligible impact" standard that would allow increased harm to marine mammals from industrial activities, regardless of a species' conservation status. By removing the MMPA's longstanding permitting and bycatch reduction requirements, the bill would reduce oversight and accountability in commercial fishing, oil exploration, and other marine operations. Requiring complete abundance survey data to set incidental take limits is unworkable given the vast and dynamic nature of marine mammal habitats, effectively weakening core protections.

The draft also appears to diminish the Marine Mammal Protection Act's alignment with the Endangered Species Act (ESA). The ESA has played a critical role in recovering marine mammal populations and should remain a complementary and reinforcing tool, not be sidelined.

Further, by exempting or reducing the role of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the bill removes critical environmental review and public input, prioritizing short-term industrial development over long-term ecological and economic resilience.

The bill also threatens U.S. leadership in international marine conservation. The MMPA Import Provision, designed to ban seafood imports from countries using harmful fishing practices, has encouraged global reforms in bycatch mitigation. Weakening this provision would erode global progress and allow seafood linked to marine mammal harm into U.S. markets.

We respectfully urge the Committee to suspend consideration of this draft until its implications can be fully evaluated. Should the reauthorization process proceed, it must involve input from the Marine Mammal Commission, marine biologists, and conservation experts to ensure the bill reflects the best available science and sound policy.

We support a transparent, science-based approach that sustains healthy marine mammal populations and the ecosystems, fisheries, and coastal communities they support.

Sincerely,

Lauren Jonaitis, VP of Policy and Programs

Society for Conservation Biology North America (SCBNA)

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