



Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council

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Michael P. Luisi, Chairman | G. Warren Elliott, Vice Chairman
Christopher M. Moore, Ph.D., Executive Director

Mr. Jerry Barnes and Mr. Matt Creelman
Fifth Coast Guard District
431 Crawford Street
Portsmouth, VA 23704

July 6, 2020

Dear Mr. Barnes and Mr. Creelman,

Please accept these comments from the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council (the Council) on the request for comments on the ongoing Port Access Route Study (PARS) for the Seacoast of New Jersey including offshore approaches to the Delaware Bay.

The Council manages more than 64 marine species¹ in federal waters and is composed of members from the coastal states of New York through North Carolina (including Pennsylvania). Fishing activity for all Council-managed commercial and recreational fisheries occurs within the study area for this PARS. 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.

The study area for this PARS encompasses 5 wind energy lease areas. Wind energy development off the U.S. east coast is advancing at a rapid pace. The Council has concerns about the potential for the coexistence of fisheries and large-scale offshore wind projects, but supports policies for U.S. wind energy development that will sustain the health of marine ecosystems and fisheries resources. Risks to marine ecosystems and fisheries must be minimized.² Our main concerns regarding offshore wind energy development include: 1) the ability of commercial and recreational fishing vessels to continue to safely fish in and transit through the wind energy areas; 2) the continued operation of fisheries-independent surveys conducted by the National Marine Fisheries Service, states, and other entities; and 3) search and rescue operations.

This PARS should consider all available data to understand patterns of commercial and recreational fishing vessel activity in the area, including vessel monitoring system (VMS), automatic information system (AIS), vessel trip report (VTR), and fisheries observer data. Each of these data sets have limitations, which must be explicitly considered and acknowledged in the PARS. For example, data on fishing and transiting locations derived from VMS, AIS, and VTRs do not account for all fishing activity in the area. Specifically, smaller vessels, vessels which only operate in state waters, and private recreational anglers are under-represented and/or completely missing from these data sets. It is

¹ 14 species (summer flounder, scup, black sea bass, bluefish, Atlantic mackerel, *Illix* and longfin squids, butterfish, Atlantic surfclams, ocean quahogs, golden and blueline tilefish, spiny dogfish [joint with the New England Fishery Management Council], and monkfish [joint with the New England Fishery Management Council]) are managed in specific fishery management plans. More than 50 additional species are managed as ecosystem components across all fishery management plans.

² The Council's policy on offshore wind energy development is available at <https://www.mafmc.org/actions/offshore-energy>.

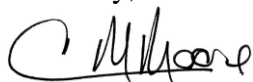
imperative that these data sets be supplemented with extensive input from commercial and recreational fishery stakeholders. Stakeholder input should be collected through a variety of channels, including in-person workshops and meetings, webinars, online comment forms, written communications, and phone calls. We are concerned that the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic will limit the Coast Guard's ability to collect stakeholder input through in-person meetings, which can be especially important for discussing and reviewing spatial data. In addition, some stakeholders feel most comfortable providing input in-person. We urge the Coast Guard to hold in-person meetings with as many stakeholders as possible once health risks have been minimized.

Input provided by fishermen through previous efforts should also be considered. This input is very valuable, though not focused on the study area for this PARS. For example, the Responsible Offshore Development Alliance (RODA) put forward a proposal for transit routes through the lease areas off southern New England.³ In addition, RODA and the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority (NYSERDA) worked with many fishermen to summarize commercial fishing transit patterns in the New York Bight.⁴ Similar input focused on the study area for this PARS should be obtained. In addition, given limitations with the available data sets, extensive stakeholder input on recreational fishing activity should also be sought.

Lastly, we urge the Coast Guard to issue clear and unambiguous guidance regarding wind farm layout restrictions that are necessary to allow for safe vessel transit, fishing activity, and search and rescue operations. These recommendations will be very important for the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management and wind developers to consider. For example, consideration should be given to concerns expressed by the New England Fishery Management Council regarding ambiguous statements about the minimum recommended spacing between wind turbines in the draft PARS for the areas offshore of Massachusetts and Rhode Island (MARIPARS). Those concerns are not repeated here but can be found in the letter linked below.⁵ The conclusions made in the final reports for the New Jersey and approaches to Delaware Bay PARS should be less ambiguous. It is important to note that the Coast Guard's recommendations in the MARIPARS build off an agreement by developers to use a uniform layout across multiple leases in that area. No such agreement currently exists for the leases in the region of this PARS; therefore, clear Coast Guard advice on this matter will be especially important.

The Council looks forward to working with the Coast Guard to ensure that any future wind development activities minimize impacts to the marine environment and can be developed in a manner that ensures coexistence with our fisheries.

Sincerely,



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

cc: M. Luisi, W. Elliott, J. Beaty

³ https://rodafisheries.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/200103-MA_RI-layout-proposal.pdf

⁴ <https://www.nyftwg.com/new-york-bight-transit-lane-workshop-2/>

⁵ <https://s3.amazonaws.com/nefmc.org/200316-NEFMC-to-USCG-re-MARIPARS.pdf>