

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20510

September 14, 2015

Eileen Sobeck
Assistant Administrator
National Marine Fisheries Service
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
1315 East-West Highway, Room 14636
Silver Spring, MD 20910

Dear Assistant Administrator Sobeck:

We are writing in regard to NOAA's decision to hold a Town Hall meeting in Rhode Island in response to petitions for designating the first National Marine Monument in the Atlantic Ocean. Areas under discussion include the New England Coral Canyons and Seamounts off of Cape Cod and the Cashes Ledge region in the Gulf of Maine, which is particularly important to constituents in our state. Recognizing that Cashes Ledge is a unique underwater area home to a diverse ecosystem, we are concerned with the process that NOAA has undertaken to evaluate the management of this region, particularly in light of the New England Fishery Management Council's (NEFMC) ongoing work in this area.

Under the Magnuson-Stevens Act Fishery Conservation and Management Act, the NEFMC has federal management authority of the ocean area encompassing Cashes Ledge. As a direct result of the NEFMC's actions, Cashes Ledge has been closed to groundfish fishing for more than ten years, and there are currently no plans to reopen it. Of particular interest for conservation on Cashes Ledge are the renowned kelp forests and the biodiverse Ammen Rock. Under NEFMC's management, these areas have been deemed off-limits to all mobile tending gear and gear capable of catching groundfish since the early 2000s. Moreover, the NEFMC recently completed its decade-long work on an Omnibus Habitat Amendment, under which the Cashes Ledge closures remain in place and current levels of protection are maintained or improved (in the case of Ammen Rock).

The NEFMC has been proactive in its stewardship of the Cashes Ledge region. Through deliberative and democratic processes, the NEFMC has consulted with scientists, public officials, fishermen, regulators, and other stakeholders to develop comprehensive management systems that have allowed the environment to continue to flourish.

A National Marine Monument designation in the Cashes Ledge region could well undermine the NEFMC's longstanding, cooperative, and effective management systems and its years of hard work to develop balanced management plans in the region. We are particularly troubled to learn that NOAA did not consult with the NEFMC about its consideration of a National Marine Monument designation prior to public notice of a Town Hall meeting.

Now that NOAA has announced a public process to discuss possible permanent protections for these marine areas, we expect this process to be thorough, open, and involve input from all relevant stakeholders. As such, we urge NOAA to hold additional public meetings, including in Maine, so all affected stakeholders are afforded an opportunity to provide input. Please keep us informed as the details of additional public forums are determined.

Thank you for your consideration of these concerns and please keep Cameron O'Brien (Cameron_O'Brien@collins.senate.gov) and Kate Shorr (Kate.Shorr@mail.house.gov) informed of any updates regarding this important issue.



Susan M. Collins
Susan M. Collins
United States Senator



Bruce Poliquin
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