

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

January 8, 2016

The Honorable Kathryn D. Sullivan, Ph.D.
Under Secretary of Commerce for Oceans and Atmosphere
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
1401 Constitution Avenue NW, Room 5128
Washington, DC 20230

Dear Under Secretary Sullivan,

We are writing to commend NOAA Fisheries Regional Administrator John Bullard for his support for the New England Fishery Management Council's (Council) efforts to substantially improve the At Sea Monitoring (ASM) program for groundfish sectors beginning in fishing year 2016. We believe the reforms set forth in several Motions adopted by the Council under Framework 55 will be essential to the effective and efficient implementation of the ASM program and to the future viability of the New England groundfish fishery.

More specifically, Motions 15 and 16 would clarify that the primary goal of the groundfish sector ASM program is to verify area fished, catch, and discards by species and by gear type, and that meeting these primary goals should be done in the most cost effective means possible. As the New England groundfish industry continues to face serious financial hardships under the continuing disaster status of the fishery, we believe this provides a coherent and rational goal for NOAA Fisheries to follow moving forward.

Motion 16 would also correct the current administrative model that has resulted in ASM coverage at levels higher than what is needed to achieve the thirty percent coefficient of variance statistical standard. This Motion would apply the methodology proposed by the Council's Plan Development Team to take a multi-year approach when considering future coverage rates in the fishery. NOAA Fisheries' exclusive use of the most recent year of data to set annual coverage rates has resulted in significant rate variations that do not accurately reflect broader trends in the fishery. The three-year moving average rate offered under Motion 16 provides an alternative that would utilize the substantial depth of data that has been generated by observers under ASM. It is our belief that this will enhance the program's cost efficiency, improve the science that determines ASM coverage rates, and provide much needed stability for the independent ASM providers and our fishermen.

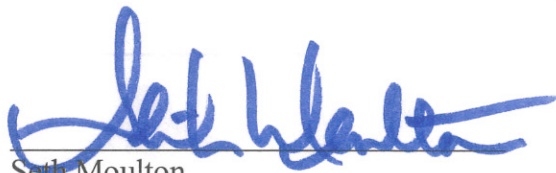
Finally, we support the Council's efforts in Motions 17b and 17c to exempt extra-large mesh trips in Southern New England and inshore Georges Bank as these trips are proven to have low levels of groundfish bycatch. It is important that NOAA Fisheries remove these trips from the overall ASM coverage calculation as this will streamline the program, reduce operational costs,

and ensure that the remainder of the fishery is not unnecessarily impacted by changes to ASM requirements in these specific areas.

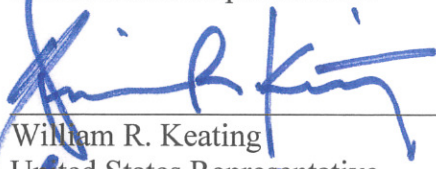
As you are aware, our offices have been in frequent contact with NOAA Fisheries to raise our respective concerns with the transition to industry cost sharing of the groundfish ASM program. We have requested that your agency utilize authority provided by Congress through the Fiscal Year 2015 Appropriations process to cover such expenses in fishing year 2015, and continue to strongly support the deferment of ASM costs to the industry until these program reforms are fully implemented.

Again, we appreciate Administrator Bullard's efforts with the Council to advance these crucial reforms to the ASM program and look forward to their timely implementation and approval for fishing year 2016. It is our hope that NOAA Fisheries will continue to engage in an open and collaborative process with our groundfish industry as we continue to find ways to sustain viable fishing communities throughout New England.

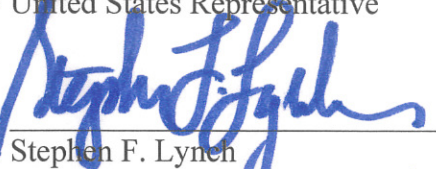
Sincerely,



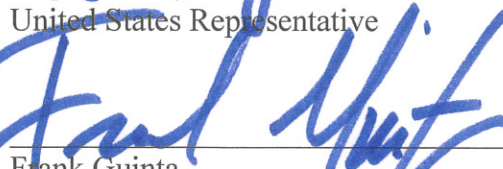
Seth Moulton
United States Representative



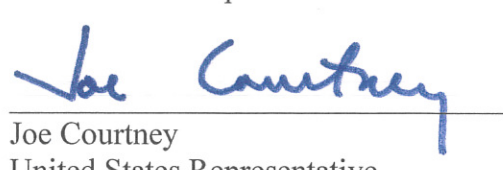
William R. Keating
United States Representative



Stephen F. Lynch
United States Representative



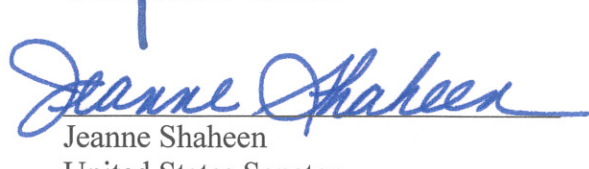
Frank Guinta
United States Representative



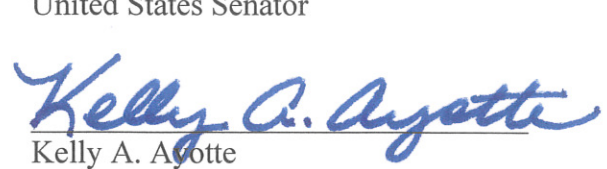
Joe Courtney
United States Representative



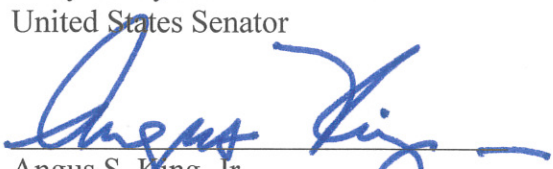
Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator



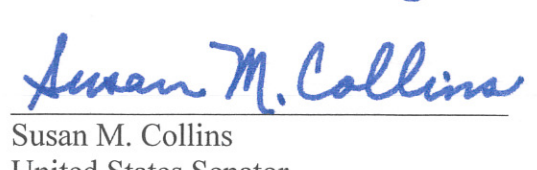
Jeanne Shaheen
United States Senator



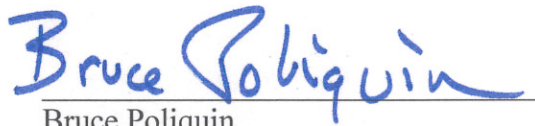
Kelly A. Ayotte
United States Senator



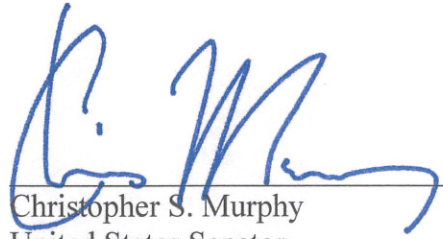
Angus S. King, Jr.
United States Senator



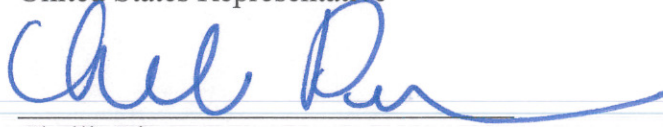
Susan M. Collins
United States Senator



Bruce Poliquin
United States Representative



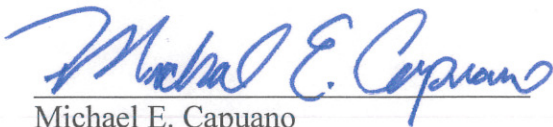
Christopher S. Murphy
United States Senator



Chellie Pingree
United States Representative



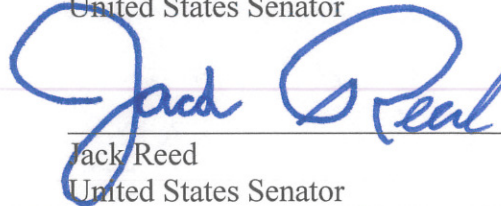
Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator



Michael E. Capuano
United States Representative



Sheldon Whitehouse
United States Senator



Jack Reed
United States Senator

cc: Eileen Sobeck, Assistant Administrator for Fisheries, NOAA
John Bullard, Regional Administrator, NOAA Fisheries