

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 5, 2018

The Honorable Ryan Zinke
Secretary
United States Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Secretary Zinke,

We write to request an extension of the March 9, 2018 deadline to submit comments on the Draft Proposed Program for the Outer Continental Shelf Oil and Gas Leasing Program for 2019-2024 and on scoping for the required Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement.

The Outer Continental Shelf Lands Act (OCSLA) provides for a 60-day comment period following the release of the Draft Proposed Program. Given the large scope of the Draft Proposed Program, we believe a 60-day extension of the deadline for comments is necessary to allow for more public hearings in coastal areas and to give the public sufficient time to submit comments on offshore drilling proposed for nearly the entire U.S. Outer Continental Shelf (OCS), encompassing over 90 percent of total OCS acreage – the largest number of potential offshore lease sales ever proposed. These public hearings are a critical opportunity for citizens to learn about and comment on the Department of the Interior’s five year plan, and due to the geographic extent of the proposed leasing program, it is imperative to provide adequate access for each region.

Section 18 of OCSLA provides for the development of an oil and gas leasing program that considers “economic, social, and environmental values” of the resources of the OCS and the potential impacts of oil and gas exploration on the marine, coastal and human environments.¹ Upon consideration of the comments received during the Request for Information comment period last year, this Draft Proposed Program identifies a preliminary list of OCS planning areas and schedule for proposed lease sales during the 2019-2024 period. We are very concerned that this Draft Proposed Program includes the Arctic, Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, and Eastern Gulf of Mexico that were rightly excluded from the 2017-2022 program.

The previous 2017-2022 program was developed over three years, and incorporated over a million comments from the public, scientists, industry, business owners, and other stakeholders. The exclusion of the Arctic, Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, and Eastern Gulf of Mexico was a reflection of the significant economic, social, and environmental risks posed by oil and gas development in those areas, as well as strong community opposition. Local and regional concerns over offshore oil and gas activities have only grown since the 2017-2022 program was finalized, with over 150 East and West Coast municipalities formally opposing offshore drilling activities off their shores, including seismic airgun surveys.

¹ 43 U.S.C. §1344(a)(1).

The opportunity for the public to provide input on the Draft Proposed Program is critical given the new, large scope of the Draft Proposed Program and its potential impacts on coastal communities and economies, the marine environment, and climate. We do not believe that the 23 currently announced “open house” style meetings are adequate in duration, location, nor format needed to meet the public input requirements. Several of the public meetings were postponed and rescheduled later in the public comment period, which does not leave adequate time for stakeholders to learn details about the DPP at the public meeting and submit meaningful comments before the comment period ends.

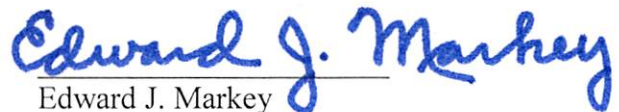
There should be more meetings in coastal communities, large and small, in all areas included in the Draft Proposed Program, as well as non-coastal areas to allow for as many impacted voices as possible to raise their concerns. In addition, formal oral testimony, as opposed to an “open house” format, would better ensure that people’s concerns are heard and recorded publicly.

We respectfully request a full and fair opportunity for the most directly impacted stakeholders to provide feedback on the Draft Proposed Program and on scoping for the Programmatic EIS through an extension of the comment period deadline to at least May 8, 2018, additional meetings in rural and coastal communities in each affected state, and the opportunity to offer formal, oral testimony.

Sincerely,



Maria Cantwell
United States Senator



Edward J. Markey
United States Senator



Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator



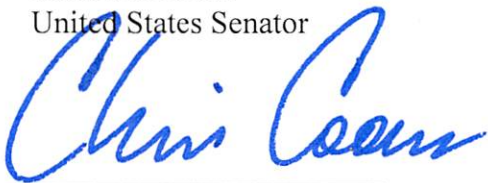
Sheldon Whitehouse
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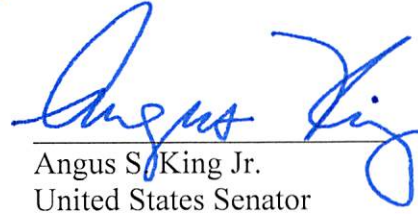

Thomas R. Carper
United States Senator

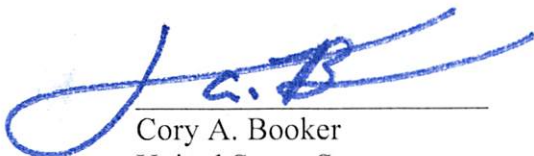

Margaret Wood Hassan
United States Senator

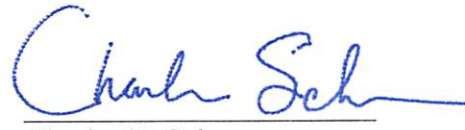

Patty Murray
United States Senator



Jack Reed
United States Senator

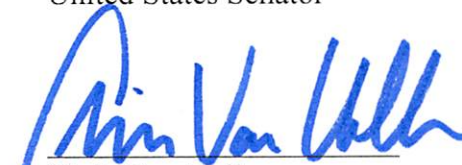

Robert Menendez
United States Senator

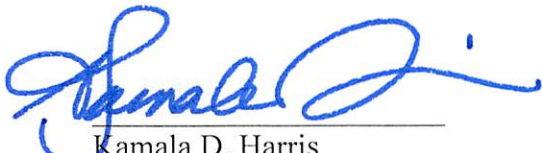

Angus S. King Jr.
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