

16 December 2011

The Honorable John Kerry
One Bowdoin Square, Tenth Floor
Boston, MA 02114

Dear Senator Kerry:

We, the undersigned group of 61 academic scientists, are writing to request your help facilitating a public review of an important marine conservation and management proposal for the waters off the coast of New England. Recently NOAA's Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary (SBNMS) released a draft proposal to designate a Sanctuary Ecological Research Area (SERA) within its boundaries (http://stellwagen.noaa.gov/library/pdfs/sbnms_sera_proposal.pdf). The rationale for the SERA proposal is to delineate an area to conduct monitoring and research to better understand how human uses of the marine environment affect biological diversity, including those species managed for sustainable harvest. By design, the SERA has three sub-areas and will allow long term studies of marine communities under different fishing regimes as well as a limited area with no-fishing that will serve as a reference site. There currently is no such area in the Gulf of Maine. Without a true research/reference area, understanding the effects of human uses of the oceans, the foundation for ecosystem management, is severely compromised. The SERA will permit such research, the results of which will address the management needs of both SBNMS and New England fisheries.

Scientists and managers contributing to the design of the SERA proposal understood that it would be referred by NOAA to the New England Fishery Management Council (NEFMC) for consideration in an ongoing Essential Fish Habitat amendment process. The referral by NOAA to the NEFMC is the key critical step to initiating an open and public review. Following its own lengthy public process, the SBNMS Sanctuary Advisory Council voted by a wide margin to forward the proposal to the NEFMC. Unfortunately, NOAA has not yet carried out that recommendation leaving the SERA proposal in bureaucratic limbo. Referring this proposal to the NEFMC is not a public notice of impending regulation but simply opens the door for a useful public discussion. Much discussion and analysis would remain once the Council opens that deliberation, with many possible outcomes as the SERA proposal – even in the most positive scenario - is combined with other contemplated management actions such as opening fishery closed areas.

This proposal clearly addresses the needs of SBNMS, the National Marine Fisheries Service, the NEFMC and the fishing community. While it may not be adopted as a result of the NEFMC and public review process, it deserves an appropriate forum to be aired. Unfortunately, it appears that political sensitivity, given the many additional conflicts currently in play in the realm of New England fisheries, may be overriding NOAA's stewardship responsibilities.

We ask for your support and encourage you to contact the Department of Commerce and NOAA to request they officially forward the SERA proposal to the NEFMC. This simple action formally initiates a public conversation. If DOC and NOAA are afraid of words, where is natural resource management in our Nation headed? Thank you, in advance, for your consideration.

Sincerely¹,

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¹ - All of the scientists listed here have requested directly that they be included in this letter. Affiliations after each name simply indicate academic affiliations and do not imply that the contents of this letter reflect the policies of those institutions.