



## New England Fishery Management Council

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John F. Quinn, J.D., Ph.D., *Chairman* | Thomas A. Nies, *Executive Director*

May 28, 2019

Mr. Edward G. LeBlanc, Chief  
Waterways Management Division  
Coast Guard Sector Southeastern New England

Dear Ed:

Please accept these comments from the New England Fishery Management Council on the Notice of Study and Public Meetings; request for comments on Port Access Route Study: The Areas Offshore of Massachusetts and Rhode Island (MARIPARS).

The New England Fishery Management Council (Council) has primary management jurisdiction for 28 marine fishery species under nine FMPs in federal waters and is composed of members from Connecticut to Maine. In addition to managing these fisheries, the Council develops measures to identify and conserve essential fish habitats, protect deep sea corals, and manage forage fisheries sustainably. The Council also supports policies for U.S. wind energy development and operations that will sustain the health of marine ecosystems and fisheries resources. While we recognize the importance of domestic energy development to U.S. economic security, the marine fisheries in Southern New England are profoundly important to the social and economic well-being of coastal communities in the Northeast U.S. and provide numerous benefits to the nation, including domestic food security. This letter focuses on aspects of MARIPARS most relevant to New England fisheries resources, habitats, and stakeholders, as well as the fishery-independent surveys necessary for effective fisheries management.

### ***General Comments:***

The Council strongly supports the Coast Guard undertaking the MARIPARS. The Council is encouraged that the Coast Guard is taking a comprehensive regional approach that includes all Massachusetts and Rhode Island Wind Energy Areas (WEAs) and both present and potential future transit needs among its study objectives.

Beyond MARIPARS, the Council suggests that the Coast Guard move forward urgently with new route studies in other areas within the Northeast U.S. where WEAs are under consideration, including New York Bight and the Gulf of Maine. Completion of route studies earlier in the area designation and leasing process could provide value for mariners of all types, along with more clarity for BOEM and wind energy developers.

***Comments on specific transit route proposals:***

The Council is not endorsing the specific transit options shown on either of the map proposals included in the Notice of Intent. However, the Council strongly encourages the Coast Guard to prioritize both present and potential future fisheries activities and fisheries-independent surveys and other fishery management-related research activity in developing any new transit routes. Our understanding is that the chart, which was developed at the December 3, 2018 Responsible Offshore Development Alliance (RODA) meeting, should be viewed as a summary of the major commercial fishing vessels transit routes as opposed to a consensus position of the commercial fishing industry. We suggest that each of these routes, and various combinations thereof, should be evaluated as part of this study. While the Council is not taking a specific position on transit lane width at this time, 4 nm has been suggested frequently by the fishing industry and we suggest that the Coast Guard consider this among the range of options evaluated.

***Comments on the Possible Scope of Recommendations:***

As noted above, the Council encourages the Coast Guard to prioritize commercial and recreational fisheries activities in the MARIPARS. The Coast Guard should use all available information on where fishing activity, including transit, currently occurs. The limitations of specific datasets should be carefully considered - especially the AIS data, which does not effectively represent the activities of smaller fishing vessels. Towards that end, please see Attachment A to these comments, a presentation of AIS and VMS data from fisheries vessels by Douglas W. Christel and Benjamin Galuardi of NOAA's Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office (GARFO). This information was presented at a transit lane meeting hosted by RODA on December 3, 2018. The Council recommends the Coast Guard consult closely with NOAA staff, who have significant expertise in analyzing and interpreting spatial information about fisheries and fisheries research activities.

The Council asks that the Coast Guard recognize research surveys in service of fisheries management as a high priority use and prioritize 'safe transit' requirements for the RV Bigelow and other research vessels. The locations of NMFS spring and fall trawl survey tows through 2014 relative to the MA-RI WEAs is shown on Figure 1. The Council also encourages the Coast Guard to engage fishery scientists, including those working at the Northeast Fisheries Science Center, in the PARS process and to consider research vessel traffic separately and in addition to commercial and recreational fishing activity. Fisheries management and Essential Fish Habitat protection are necessary 'uses' of the marine area.

In terms of future transit needs, the Council supports inclusion of Objective #2, "Determine potential vessel traffic types, patterns, and density." As offshore wind projects are installed, depending on the specific layout and orientation selected for turbines and other components, transit and fishing patterns will change. The Council is concerned that new wind farm installations and transit lanes could lead to pressure points where fishing activity and transit becomes concentrated in ways that negatively impact fisheries or fisheries research and management activities. Additionally, the Council encourages the Coast Guard to use the best available scientific methods for projecting potential future vessel traffic as wind farms become operational. NOAA Fisheries researchers are currently engaged in data management and analysis projects to support these scenario analyses. The Council encourages the Coast Guard to consult with Eric Thunberg, Chief Social Sciences Branch NEFSC, 508-495-4703,

Eric.Thunberg@noaa.gov and Douglas Christel, Fishery Policy Analyst GARFO, 978-281-9141, Douglas.Christel@noaa.gov on their ongoing research of this topic.

The Notice states that the Coast Guard intends to consider specific impacts of the number, size, type, and layout of turbines and electrical service platforms (ESPs), increased vessel traffic, changing vessel traffic patterns, weather conditions, or navigational difficulty. To ensure the safety of future fishing operations the Council encourages the Coast Guard to engage in the following activities:

- To add search and rescue as a category of impacts explicitly considered in the PARS;
- To specifically address whether cables associated with new wind farms would be allowed within transit lanes;
- To provide advice to developers and BOEM on ways that layout of turbines and ESPs could facilitate transit *within* wind energy areas, which could mitigate the use pressure within any new transit lanes;
- To protect fisheries activities and fishery independent research surveys as allowable activities in any transit lanes; and
- To identify potential secondary effects of concentrating activity within transit lanes, for example effects on managed or protected species, or essential fish habitats.

***Comments and questions about process and timeline:***

The Coast Guard provides a six-month timeline for the release of the final MARIPARS report but not a timeline for implementation of any new transit routes. The Council asks the Coast Guard to specify a timeline for implementation because it is concerned about the implementation of any new transit routes in relation to planned construction of the Vineyard Wind project. Is the Coast Guard assuming a specific layout for that project as a given for the purpose of developing transit lane recommendations? What about other projects with construction and operations plans that publish during the MARIPARS study period?

***Conclusion***

Again, we strongly support the Coast Guard undertaking the MARIPARS and we appreciate the opportunity to provide comments to ensure the study meets the needs of fisheries resources, habitats, stakeholders, and the scientific surveys necessary for effective fishery management decision-making. The Council looks forward to working with the Coast Guard to ensure that the MARIPARS meets its objectives so that offshore wind installations do not preclude the ability of the Council and NMFS to effectively manage the region's fishery resources.

Please contact us if you have any questions.

Sincerely,



Thomas Nies  
Executive Director

**Figure 1 – National Marine Fisheries Service trawl survey tow locations relative to MA and RI WEAs. Fall (1963-2014) and spring (1968-2014). Colored shading shows the relative density of survey tows.**

