Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

March 9, 2015

Secretary Sally Jewell
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C St NW
Washington, D.C. 20240

Dear Secretary Jewell:

We are writing to express our deep concern over the inclusion of the Mid- and South Atlantic planning areas in the recently-released Draft 2017-2022 Five-Year Outer Continental Shelf (OCS) Oil and Gas Leasing Program. We urge you to maintain the longstanding protections for the East Coast by removing the Atlantic planning areas from the 2017-2022 Program before it is finalized.

The draft proposal would threaten the economic and ecological productivity of East Coast states by holding a lease sale off the coasts of Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia. We understand that along the Atlantic coast, there is some interest in proceeding with oil and gas drilling. However, we believe that proponents fail to appreciate the severe risks of offshore drilling to our critical coastal and marine environments, and our fishing, tourism, and recreation economies. The current five-year plan had determined that lease sales in the Atlantic would not be appropriate due to the lack of infrastructure to support oil and gas exploration and development, inadequate spill preparedness and response capabilities, as well as a variety of issues related to potentially conflicting uses. We believe the circumstances that led to the Atlantic coast's exclusion remain unchanged.

Offshore drilling safety continues to be a major area of concern. It has been more than four years since the Deepwater Horizon tragedy, yet very little has been done to implement many of the comprehensive safety reforms recommended by the *National Commission on the BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill and Offshore Drilling*. Although the draft plan proposes that leasing occur at least 50 miles off the East Coast, offshore oil spills do not respect such boundaries. Despite the fact that the Macondo well was located 49 miles off the coast of Louisiana, the BP oil spill reached the coastlines of all five Gulf Coast states, demonstrating that no buffer from the coastline is sufficient to prevent the devastating impacts of an oil spill.

The Atlantic OCS contains less than four percent of U.S. oil and gas reserves and it is estimated that at current domestic consumption rates, these oil reserves would last for less than five months and the gas reserves would last for less than 10 months. On the other hand, the Atlantic could help generate 143 gigawatts of offshore wind power, enough energy to power 115 million households. Studies have also shown that offshore energy development could provide twice as many jobs as oil and gas development in the Atlantic. The industrial development required to proceed with oil and gas activities, along with the risks of an oil spill, are dangers to which we do not believe the Atlantic should be exposed – especially when the benefits of renewable energy development are clear. Further, your Department has not yet finished its process of permitting seismic testing in the Atlantic. We believe that this offshore seismic testing is harmful to marine

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life and the environment, and we certainly think it is premature and dangerous to move forward with leasing off the East Coast before this process has even been completed.

The East Coast is also facing unique and difficult challenges due to climate change. Rising ocean temperatures and ocean acidification have already begun to stress the Atlantic marine ecosystem, while sea level rise and extreme weather events – such as Hurricane Sandy – have already devastated our coastal communities. Significant federal, state and local resources have been expended in an effort to improve the health of Atlantic fisheries, protect endangered and threatened species, and ensure the continued vitality of our coastal communities and the recreation and tourism industries that depend on them. Coastal activity in Atlantic states – ranging from fishing, tourism, recreation, and more – currently supports 1.4 million jobs and nets $95 billion in gross domestic product annually. We would like to see jobs and revenues expand in a way that does not threaten industries that have sustained us for generations and remain essential to our cultural heritage.

The health of our ocean is directly tied to the economic health of our communities. We are unwilling to accept the tremendous risks, which vastly outweigh the potential gains, of oil and gas drilling in the Atlantic. We therefore urge you to remove the Mid- and South Atlantic planning areas from the 2017-2022 Five Year OCS Oil and Gas Leasing Program.

Sincerely,

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Member of Congress

NIKI TSONGAS
Member of Congress

GERALD E. CONNOLLY
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