

# Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

July 23, 2025

Ms. Laura Grimm  
Chief of Staff performing the duties of  
Under Secretary of Commerce for  
Oceans and Atmosphere and NOAA  
Administrator National Oceanic and  
Atmospheric Administration  
1401 Constitution Avenue, N.W., Room 5128  
Washington, D.C. 20230

Mr. Eugenio Piñeiro Soler, Director  
NOAA Fisheries  
1315 East-West Highway  
Silver Spring, Maryland 20910

Dear Ms. Grimm and Mr. Piñeiro Soler,

We write to express concern about the unprecedented number of eastern North Pacific gray whale deaths in the greater San Francisco Bay Area. We also request information on whether the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) has sufficient staff and resources to adequately investigate, create a response plan, and execute strategy to reduce these deaths.

This year, the region has witnessed a dramatic surge in whale fatalities, with at least 21 whales found dead.<sup>1</sup> This exceeds several individual years of the 2019–2023 Unusual Mortality Event (UME) recorded in the state of California, which resulted in a 40 percent decline in the eastern North Pacific gray whale population.<sup>2</sup> Researchers estimate this population has now declined to approximately 13,000 whales—the lowest number since the 1970s.<sup>3</sup> More than 30 individual gray whales have also been observed in the Bay for extended periods, an alarming increase compared to only six sightings in 2024.<sup>4</sup> Many of the whales appear emaciated, with experts suggesting they may be driven into the Bay by diminishing food sources along their migratory path from Mexico to the Arctic. While members of the community appreciate seeing whales return to the Bay, vessel strikes in the Bay also pose a significant threat, contributing to at least seven gray whale deaths this year.<sup>5</sup>

Despite longstanding collaborations among federal, state, and local partners, we’ve received reports that NOAA’s response to whale strandings has become increasingly delayed. This raises questions about NOAA’s ability to meet its marine mammal conservation responsibilities under the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA). In addition, we’ve heard concerns about

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<sup>1</sup>“Gray whale deaths in the Bay Area climb to highest level in 25 years”, *NBC Bay Area*, July 21<sup>st</sup>, 2025, <https://www.nbcbayarea.com/news/local/gray-whale-deaths-bay-area/3918817/>.

<sup>2</sup> “2019-2023 Eastern North Pacific Gray Whale UME (CLOSED)”, *NOAA Fisheries*, January 31, 2025, <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/national/marine-life-distress/2019-2023-eastern-north-pacific-gray-whale-ume-closed>.

<sup>3</sup> “Eastern North Pacific Gray Whales Continue Decline After Downturn During Unusual Mortality Event”, *NOAA Fisheries*, June 18, 2025, <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/feature-story/eastern-north-pacific-gray-whales-continue-decline-after-downturn-during-unusual>.

<sup>4</sup> Jon Haworth, “6 whales found dead in Bay Area in 1 week as authorities scramble for answers”, *ABC7 News*, May 30, 2025, <https://abc7news.com/post/5-whales-die-san-francisco-bay-area-week-officials-say/16581928/>.

<sup>5</sup> Megan Ely, “California Academy of Sciences Confirms 22 Dead Whales in the San Francisco Bay Area in 2025”, *California Academy of Sciences*, June 17<sup>th</sup>, 2025, <https://www.calacademy.org/press/releases/california-academy-of-sciences-confirms-22-dead-whales-in-the-san-francisco-bay-area>.

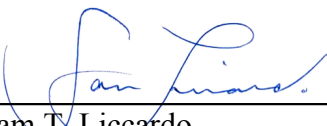
disruptions in the John H. Prescott Marine Mammal Rescue and Response Grant Program, a program mandated under the MMPA that provides crucial funding for organizations responding to stranded and injured marine mammals. Given the gray whales' declining number, immediate, coordinated action is essential to prevent further losses and safeguard the long-term survival of these marine mammals.


We respectfully request a written response to the following questions by August 17, 2025:

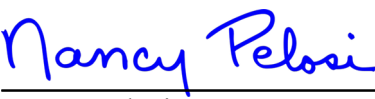
1. Given the alarming number of gray whale deaths in the San Francisco Bay Area this year, we request information about whether NOAA has tested any hypothesis, developed any theory, or reached any conclusion about the (a) the cause of the apparent increase of intrusion of whales into the San Francisco Bay, and (b) the cause of the apparent spike in whale deaths.
2. What current response efforts are underway?
3. What contingency plans does NOAA have in place should mortalities continue, and is NOAA actively preparing for the possibility of another UME?
4. Given NOAA's reported funding cuts, staffing shortages, and limited emergency response capacity, how is the agency ensuring compliance with the Marine Mammal Protection Act and the National Marine Sanctuaries Act?
  - i. Additionally, does NOAA have sufficient staff and resources to respond promptly and effectively to whale strandings?
  - ii. How has the agency maintained channels of communication and coordination between NOAA and local response organizations amid NOAA's staffing reductions?
5. Why have local response organizations seen disruptions in the issuance of Congressionally appropriated funds for the John H. Prescott Marine Mammal Rescue and Response Grant Program?
6. How does the agency plan to prevent similar disruptions in the future grant cycles?

We value NOAA's longstanding commitment to marine mammal conservation, and we look forward to your timely response to the urgent challenges facing gray whales.

Sincerely,

  
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Sam T. Liccardo  
Member of Congress

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Jared Huffman  
Member of Congress

  
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Nancy Pelosi  
Member of Congress



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Jimmy Panetta  
Member of Congress



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Mike Thompson  
Member of Congress



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Kevin Mullin  
Member of Congress



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John Garamendi  
Member of Congress



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Zoe Lofgren  
Member of Congress



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Ro Khanna  
Member of Congress



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Eric Swalwell  
Member of Congress



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Lateefah Simon  
Member of Congress



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Ami Bera  
Member of Congress



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J. Luis Correa  
Member of Congress



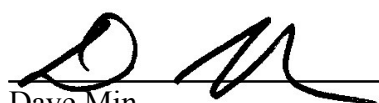
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Julia Brownley  
Member of Congress



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Ted W. Lieu  
Member of Congress



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Dave Min  
Member of Congress



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Nanette Diaz Barragan  
Member of Congress



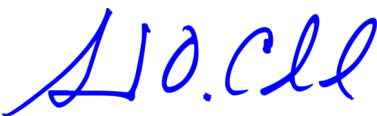
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Sara Jacobs  
Member of Congress



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Mark DeSaulnier  
Member of Congress



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Salud Carbajal  
Member of Congress