

EVISCERATING KEY MARINE MAMMAL PROTECTIONS

Failed: 160-259

SUMMARY:

The House rejected an amendment that would have gutted key provisions of the Marine Mammal Protection Act to fast track seismic airgun blasting and other industrial activities in the ocean that harm marine mammals. It would also have created dangerous loopholes in Endangered Species Act protections for marine mammals. (*December 10, 2019, Roll Call No. 666*).

BACKGROUND:

Seismic airgun blasting in search of offshore oil can be devastating to marine wildlife. High-powered seismic airguns release loud blasts of air through the ocean and into the seafloor. Blasts can travel underwater up to 2,500 miles and can occur as often as every 10 seconds for months at a time. For marine wildlife, sound plays an essential role in feeding, mating, and communicating, but seismic airgun blasting disrupts these essential behaviors. Repetitive sound waves can cause temporary or permanent hearing loss, serious injury, and can even kill zooplankton, commercial fish stocks, sea turtles, and large whales.

Rep. Johnson (R-LA) introduced an amendment to H.R. 729, the Coastal and Great Lakes Communities Enhancement Act, that would have weakened the legal standards for issuing Incidental Harassment Authorizations (IHA) under the Marine Mammal Protection Act, which protect marine mammals from harmful activities conducted in the ocean. The amendment would have prevented National Marine Fisheries Service scientists from requiring almost any kind of mitigation of harm to marine mammals, sharply limited monitoring of seismic airgun blasting impacts, and imposed a system of tight deadlines and automatic permit approvals that would have made review of potentially harmful activities difficult. The bill also would have created a reckless loophole in Endangered Species Act (ESA) protections for marine wildlife by exempting IHA permit holders from complying with the ESA's prohibition on the take of threatened and endangered species. Lastly, it would have substituted the bill's abbreviated approval process for the obligation the ESA puts on federal agencies to ensure their actions are not likely to jeopardize the survival and recovery of threatened and endangered species.

OUTCOME:

On December 10, 2019, the House rejected the Johnson amendment, 160-259. "No" was the pro-conservation vote.