



October 18, 2019

The Honorable Raúl M. Grijalva
Chairman, Committee on
Natural Resources
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairman Grijalva:

This letter provides the Department of Commerce's (Department) views on H.R. 2406, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Commissioned Officer Corps Amendments Act of 2019. The Department appreciates the Committee's interest in NOAA's Commissioned Officer Corps (NOAA Corps). The Department believes this bill would improve NOAA's ability to administer the NOAA Corps.

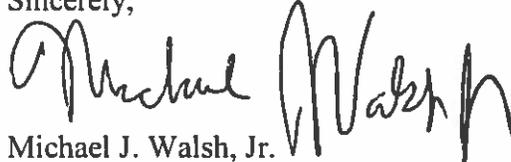
Similar to other uniformed services, NOAA Corps officers spend much of their careers away from family and friends, operating NOAA ships and aircraft for up to nine months a year in support of NOAA's weather forecasting, marine resource stewardship, and other missions. Many of these deployments are in the harshest environmental conditions, such as in the Arctic or active severe storms.

The NOAA Corps Amendments Act would provide authorities that would allow for more flexible management of grade distribution, appointments, and the overall fitness of the Corps. In order to improve recruitment and retention of NOAA Corps officers, the legislation also would increase parity with the other uniformed services with respect to benefits such as family programs, mental health resources, and educational assistance. The Department notes that this legislation would authorize an increase in strength of up to 500 officers from the current authorized level of 321. This level is not supported by current appropriations nor the President's Budget. Importantly, any future increases in Corps levels would need to be considered in the context of government-wide and Department priorities.

This legislation also would authorize current and former NOAA Corps officers to apply for jobs being filled under merit staffing procedures within the Department, placing them in similar status to other internal employees. This change increases the competitiveness of NOAA Corps officers in the application process, as they presently have no hiring status. The Department is very supportive of the ability to retain veterans of the NOAA Corps and the unique skill sets they possess.

We appreciate the opportunity to present our views on H.R. 2406. The Office of Management and Budget has advised that there is no objection to the transmittal of these views from the standpoint of the Administration's program. If you have any further questions, please contact Lawson Kluttz, Associate Director for Legislative Affairs at (202) 482-3663.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michael Walsh, Jr." with a stylized flourish at the end.

Michael J. Walsh, Jr.
Chief of Staff performing the delegated duties of the
General Counsel

cc: The Honorable Rob Bishop
Ranking Member, Committee on
Natural Resources

The Honorable Jared Huffman,
Chairman, Subcommittee on
Water, Oceans, and Wildlife

The Honorable Tom McClintock
Ranking Member, Subcommittee on
Water, Oceans, and Wildlife