United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

April 2, 2026

Mr. Eugenio Piñero Soler
Assistant Administrator for Fisheries
National Marine Fisheries Service
1315 East-West Highway
Silver Spring, MD 20910

Dear Administrator Soler:

Thank you for taking the time to attend the Maine Fishermen's Forum in early March and engaging with Maine's fishing community directly. As experienced firsthand, the Forum brings together fishermen, sea farmers, gear suppliers, state and federal scientists and regulators, and other stakeholders for education, collaboration, and commerce. We appreciate your attention to the serious issues facing Maine fishermen hearing directly from the industries about the impacts of federal regulation. This includes the ongoing discussion on the use of ropeless/on demand fishing gear in the Gulf of Maine.

Maine lobstermen's concerns about ropeless gear are well-documented and deserve serious consideration. It is important to give full and meaningful weight to concerns raised by fishermen regarding ropeless/on demand fishing gear as NMFS's core strategy for North Atlantic right whale (NARW) conservation. We urge you continue to explore other options such as Dynamic Area Management with the Maine Department of Marine Resources (DMR), and strongly encourage you to continue engaging fishermen directly as your agency approaches new rulemaking on this issue.

In 2022, the Maine Delegation secured a six-year regulatory pause for Maine's lobster industry, saving the industry from a misguided regulatory approach that would have shuttered our fishery. The regulatory pause language included funding to assist with gear modification and configuration, improve scientific understanding of NARW migration patterns, and invest in right whale-related research, monitoring, and conservation. Funding through the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation has enabled the Maine DMR to create the Maine Innovative Gear Library (MIGL), which began gear testing with participants in the summer of 2024 and has since expanded to four gear hubs spanning the coast from Brunswick to Addison. The MIGL program now has 33 active testers operating across all seven Maine lobster zones, with more than 3,200 hauls completed as of December 2025. While the sample size is small and does not inform the scalability of the technology, it is meaningful progress, and it speaks to the industry's willingness to engage and provide critical feedback to NMFS that should be taken into consideration. MIGL expects to publish its full results later in 2026.

The program has made important strides, allowing our lobstermen to trial a variety of ropeless technologies in real-world conditions, and collect feedback and data on the use of these gear technologies. Initial data and interviews with lobstermen indicate that substantial issues must be

resolved before this technology is suitable for broad implementation in Maine's fishery. Notably, the lobster industry has raised a number of concerns with this technology, which is an important part of what the Maine DMR is documenting and assessing through this work.

Cost and increased trip time are among the most significant barriers; a study by the Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries estimated that a full transition to ropeless gear in the 2015-2019 timeframe would have resulted in an average of $40 million decline in annual revenue and 3.5 million fewer pounds (a 20% decline) of lobster landed for the Massachusetts lobster fishery[1]—notably, a fishery that is considerably smaller than Maine's fishery. MIGL interview data also identify time burden as one of the Maine lobster industry's major operational concerns and the research is exploring the extent to which hauling time per trap increases with on-demand gear. With hundreds of traps per trip, that compounds into a material reduction in daily productivity—one that, for certain gear configurations, rivals the purchase cost of the equipment itself.

Interoperability is another unresolved and critical challenge. There are more than a dozen manufacturers currently developing ropeless systems, and currently, there is no demonstrated ability for those systems to communicate or integrate with one another at scale. Research conducted by MITRE determined that acoustic interoperability among on-demand gear systems has not been demonstrated in busy, mixed-gear fisheries alongside mobile groundfish and scallop operations. This matters not only for practical fishing operations, but for safety and enforcement. Without interoperability, it is difficult for fishermen to locate one another's submerged gear and avoid dangerous conflicts. Yet despite this acknowledged gap, federal communications have at times suggested that the interoperability challenge is closer to resolution than the evidence supports.

As you are aware, industry groups including the New England Fisherman's Stewardship Association (NEFSA) and the Maine Lobstermen's Association (MLA) have consistently and publicly shared their serious concerns about a required transition to ropeless gear as the primary management strategy to avoid conflicts with NARWs. In public comments submitted in response to Executive Order 14276, Restoring American Seafood Competitiveness, NEFSA wrote that ropeless fishing gear "presents serious safety risks to fishermen, increases the likelihood of vessel interactions and gear loss, and is fundamentally incompatible with mixed-use fishing grounds". MLA has communicated similar concerns to the Senate and House Appropriations Committee, the Maine Delegation, and NMFS directly, warning that requiring full compliance with ropeless gear would result in, "a substantial increase in operating costs" and "would undermine Maine's owner-operator model and could create pressure for consolidation of the fishery."

You heard these concerns directly from lobstermen at the Maine Fishermen's Forum during the Federal Fisheries Leadership seminar. Lobstermen shared with you firsthand their concerns about the cost of this technology, and the dangers of not knowing where gear is placed in the Gulf of Maine. Small vessels simply would not have access to capital, deck space, crew, or familiarity with high-tech systems to survive a transition to ropeless fishing.

[1] https://www.mass.gov/info-details/on-demand-fishing-gear-economic-model

We believe a patchwork of flexible, dynamic, adaptive approaches that reflect real-world conditions, ongoing technology development, and meaningful stakeholder input offers the best opportunity to maintain a successful fishery, protect right whales, and preserve the working waterfronts and coastal communities that depend on it. We are supportive of the state-federal partnership through which NMFS has been providing support and cooperation to Maine DMR to develop a dynamic management strategy that includes development of a monitoring plan. We encourage NMFS to provide additional engagement from the Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office to make this a feasible management option, prior to the drafting and publication of future rulemaking.

We appreciate your willingness to listen, and we encourage NMFS to approach future rulemaking with a genuine commitment to flexibility and co-development directly with stakeholders. A single, uniform solution, particularly one that mandates technology that is not yet proven at scale, is not the right path forward for this fishery or for the conservation goals we share. We look forward to continuing this conversation and welcome the opportunity to work with you and your team directly.

Sincerely,

Angus S. King, Jr.
United States Senator

Susan M. Collins
United States Senator

CC: The Honorable Dr. Neil Jacobs, Under Secretary for Oceans and Atmosphere