

VIA EMAIL ONLY
(akhabitatfocusarea@noaa.gov)

August 29, 2014

Jeanne Hanson, Assistant Regional Administrator
NOAA Alaska Region
222 West 7th Avenue, Room 517
Anchorage, AK 99513-7577

RE: SUPPORT FOR KACHEMAK BAY AS A HABITAT FOCUS

AREA Dear Ms. Hanson:

The undersigned people and groups represent thousands of Alaskans with a strong interest in protecting the remarkable natural resources of Kachemak Bay. Please accept these comments voicing strong support for NOAA to select Kachemak Bay as a Habitat Focus Area.

Kachemak Bay has been heralded as one of the richest estuaries in world, and it supports a rich and diverse array of marine and terrestrial life throughout its expansive watershed. However, expanding uses and changing climate regimes are producing rapid changes in the Kachemak Bay ecosystem which threaten the region's natural systems and the vibrant economies they support. As a result, selecting Kachemak Bay as a Habitat Focus Area (HFA) is important for a number of reasons.

First, habitat conservation management actions in Kachemak Bay can lead to measurable, positive, long term impacts. For example, NOAA's listed objectives for Kachemak Bay – including tools for habitat visualization, oceanic circulation, harmful algal blooms, ocean acidification risk assessment, and hazard analysis and critical control point planning – would lead to tangible outcomes that would help guide better management decisions in the years to come.

Furthermore, there is a high likelihood there will be measurable progress toward the desired targets in the next 3 to 5 years. None of the identified tools is overly-ambitious, and there's considerable work already done or soon to be done that supports measurable progress over the next several years.

For example, there is already a considerable body of work directed toward circulation patterns, algal blooms and ocean acidification in Kachemak Bay – to name but a few areas of research and management that reinforce the HFA objectives. As a result, it's safe to say Kachemak Bay offers various turn-key opportunities that will allow NOAA to realize considerable gains in the short to medium term.

Next, a Habitat Focus Area will improve our scientific understanding of habitat functions in Kachemak Bay and fill important gaps. Despite the fact Kachemak Bay possesses one of the largest bodies of scientific inquiry in Alaska, there remain important gaps which a HFA can help fill. For example, a better understanding of gyre and circulation behaviors could help illuminate important gains relative to toxic algal blooms and increased ocean acidification. As a result, the ample body of existing information will provide a strong platform to take the next steps needed to enhance our understanding of the ecosystem's inherent complexities.

Finally, Kachemak Bay possesses a wealth of people and groups with long histories working to protect the region's important but increasingly stressed natural resources. For example, groups such as Cook Inletkeeper, Center for Alaska Coastal Studies, University of Alaska/Kachemak Bay Campus, Pratt Museum, Kachemak Heritage Land Trust, Homer Soil & Water Conservation District, Kachemak Bay Research Reserve, Sustainable Homer, Kachemak Bay Conservation Society, NOAA's Kasitsna Bay Laboratory, Friends of Kachemak Bay State Park and the newly formed Kachemak Bay Water Trail all possess the potential for strong partnerships that would enhance an HFA.

In closing, we hope you agree Kachemak Bay is a prime candidate for a Habitat Focus Area. It meets all the criteria identified by NOAA to support a HFA, and it has a long history developing and implementing collaborative partnerships that can help sustain abundant fish populations, protect threatened and endangered species, protect coastal and marine areas and habitats at risk, ensure resilient coastal communities, and sustain access for recreation and tourism uses.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

On behalf of the following people and groups:

Bob Shavelson
Cook Inletkeeper

Jim Lavrakas
Homer Chamber of Commerce

Roberta Highland
Kachemak Bay Conservation Society

Nina Faust
Kachemak Bay Crane Watch

Beth Trowbridge
Center for Alaska Coastal Studies

Dave Brann
Kachemak Bay Water Trail Committee

Chief Patrick Norman
Native Village of Port Graham