June 26, 2006

The Honorable Don Young
Chairman
House Transportation and
Infrastructure Committee
2165 Rayburn HOB
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable James Oberstar
Ranking Member
House Transportation and
Infrastructure Committee
2165 Rayburn HOB
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Young and Ranking Member Oberstar:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Marine Debris Research Prevention and Reduction Act (S. 362). Every year thousands of seabirds die needlessly because of entanglement in, or ingestion of, debris and trash that finds its way into the oceans. American Bird Conservancy applauds the Committee’s willingness to address the many dangers marine debris poses to seabirds and marine mammals through this comprehensive bill that will help identify its sources and lead to more effective prevention.

American Bird Conservancy (ABC) is a 501(c) 3 non-profit organization dedicated to the conservation of wild native birds in the Americas. Founded in 1994, ABC has long been a leader in Partners in Flight and the North American Bird Conservation Initiative and is the only U.S.-based group dedicated solely to overcoming the greatest threats facing native birds in the Western Hemisphere. ABC has 7,000 members, offices in Virginia and the District of Columbia, and staff in California, Indiana, Missouri, Montana, New Hampshire, New York, and Oregon.

As you may know, ingestion or entanglement in marine debris is a growing problem for seabird species. Studies estimate that at minimum, 44% of all seabird species are impacted by marine debris and a study conducted of bycaught birds in the North Pacific recorded plastic particles in the stomachs of 8 of 11 seabird species. Ingested plastic particles can lead to problems with digestion, such as inefficiency, blockages or ulcerations. Several studies have shown reduced fitness or weight gain in birds with high levels of plastics in their digestive tracts. Plastic digestion can lead to increased contaminant loads, particularly PCBs.

Entanglement in “Ghost nets” (discarded fishing nets) or other fishing related debris also poses a significant source of mortality of marine birds\textsuperscript{2,7}.

While all species are potentially impacted by ingestion of marine debris, Procellariforms (fulmars, shearwaters, petrels, albatross, etc.) are particularly vulnerable as they do not regurgitate plastics and such objects may remain in their gizzards for months or even years\textsuperscript{7}. These birds tend to offload plastics through regurgitation to young resulting in high plastic loads in young birds\textsuperscript{7,8}. Northern Fulmars are particularly susceptible. Plastic pieces were found in more than 80\% of Fulmars sampled in the North Pacific and North Atlantic Oceans\textsuperscript{9,10,11}.

These magnificent birds face significant global threats posed by entanglement in marine debris and pollution. Therefore, ABC supports S.362 and the establishment of a new federal program in the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration, and the United States Coast Guard (USCG), to address the problem of persistent marine debris and its effect on seabirds and the entire marine environment.

Again, thank you for providing American Bird Conservancy an opportunity to share its views on the urgent need to pass the Marine Debris Research Prevention and Reduction Act as soon as possible. Should you or your staff wish for further information, please do not hesitate to contact ABC’s Dr. Jennifer Arnold, Seabird Program Director, at 202-234-7181 x216.

Sincerely,

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Dr. George Fenwick  
President  
American Bird Conservancy
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