RODA statement on considerations for the Biden Administration from the fishing industry and coastal communities

January 27, 2021 -- The United States commercial fishing industry is united around the common goals of protecting our traditional fishing communities, maintaining domestic food security, and leading with evidence-based decision making during an era of rapidly changing ocean use. We are encouraged by the new Administration’s commitment to inclusivity and environmental science. We look forward to improving partnerships between lawmakers, policymakers, and fisheries experts to protect and promote this low-environmental impact protein source, which leads the world in sustainability through the rigorous fisheries management and conservation requirements of the Magnuson Stevens Act.

It is imperative that our elected officials support and adopt policies to minimize and mitigate the effects of climate change; the strategies to do so must equally address the pressing issues of food production, ecosystem health, and preserving cultural heritage. As evidenced by his Agency nominations and recent Executive Order on “Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad,” we are encouraged that the President is taking a measured approach. We applaud leadership and processes that underscore the value of science-based collaboration with members of small communities who are most impacted by natural resource management decisions.

Offshore Renewable Energy Development

The Administration has made clear its commitment to address climate change, which is a matter of critical importance to seafood harvesters adapting to the effects of ecosystem changes every day. The rapid advancement of large offshore wind energy facilities to meet climate goals places our nation at the dawn of a new era of ocean industrialization. While mitigating carbon emissions is urgent and necessary, so is protecting and prioritizing domestic sourcing of sustainable, affordable, and healthy protein. This necessitates evaluating the most efficient means of reducing atmospheric carbon while minimizing impacts to biodiversity and the economy.

Fishing communities stand ready and willing to incorporate their unique expertise in the country's transition to renewable energy but there must be meaningful ways for them to do so. Three key topics must be addressed to ensure responsible planning for the unprecedented demands that are anticipated to be placed on our oceans.
1. Improving regional research efforts and scientific understanding of offshore infrastructure projects

Development of the Outer Continental Shelf should only be done in a purposeful planned manner utilizing the best available science. Our scientific understanding of impacts from offshore wind energy development is improving, but there is far more unknown about how development will alter the physical, biological, economic and social dimensions of the marine environment.

Evidence-based planning is necessary to understand and minimize impacts, and currently that does not exist for the proposed scale of development to proceed responsibly. For commercial fishermen, it is extremely worrisome to see the push for a new industry that jeopardizes a sustainable and historic one without rigorous scientific due diligence. Such diligence must apply to transparent information about the environmental and economic effects associated with the entire offshore renewable energy supply chain, from mining rare earth minerals for battery components to turbine production to maritime traffic to decommissioning.

Currently, there is no balancing of priorities in offshore renewable energy permitting decisions. Promises to achieve production targets for offshore wind energy based solely on climate goals will significantly impact other public needs such as food production, tourism, and national security. Such targets, if adopted, must be accompanied by a comprehensive roadmap for evaluating tradeoffs and should not be pursued before the creation of balanced multi-use ocean plans. These must include funding for environmental research and compensatory mitigation for impacted sectors.

2. Enhanced interstate coordination and a clear delineation of authorities within federal agencies

Some of the biggest challenges around offshore renewable energy development are due to a lack of consistency in the leasing and planning processes, nonexistent or inconsistent engagement opportunities, and poor integration between planning and permitting authorities.

Regional issues associated with environmental and fisheries impacts require appropriate federal oversight. The current approach results in widespread duplication of efforts, inconsistency and inequity, misplaced interstate competition, and overall unpredictability. To help address the lack of coordination of regional research, RODA co-founded the Responsible Offshore Science Alliance with federal and state entities, offshore wind energy developers, and expert fisheries scientists to serve as a trusted regional coordinating entity. The Administration should reward the collaboration on this innovative public-private partnership and utilize it as a resource for improved coordination.

Responsibilities for the various federal agencies involved is often unclear. A
clarification of the roles for these entities is urgently needed and regulatory authority should be returned to agencies with most expertise in the relevant aspects of environmental review.

We look forward to an incoming Commerce Secretary who can bring her expertise and knowledge of coordinating numerous federal, state and local agencies, as well as community members and regional partners together through her experience with the Block Island Wind Farm. As governor, Ms. Raimondo witnessed first hand the time and dedication required for effective collaboration and the complex links of offshore wind energy with the U.S. economy.

3. Facilitation of industry to industry cooperation

As users who will inevitably share the ocean space, regulations, and potential workforce, it is paramount that industry to industry cooperation improves between offshore wind energy development and fishing. Currently this is very difficult to achieve and would benefit from regulatory incentives or direct federal involvement.

RODA has worked to bring industries together through its Joint Industry Task Force and fishing industry leaders are committed to direct engagement when assured those efforts can bear fruit. Small collaborative projects and communication have added value to the process, but not enough resources have been committed to truly catalyze the industries working together in a meaningful way. Absent resources and in a regulatory atmosphere that strongly favors one party, progress is difficult. To be effective, support must be directed to fisheries-driven efforts, not just wind-organized ones. Similarly, some wind developers have expended far more effort than others to work with affected communities in good faith. Incentives to do so must be greatly expanded.

“30x30”

The Presidential Memorandum on scientific integrity must extend to implementation of science-based recommendations for conservation and environmental protection. We are encouraged by the Administration’s commitment to collect input from stakeholders in the “30x30” provisions included in the Executive Order on climate change, which implements a goal of conserving at least 30% of U.S. waters by 2030. We echo the concern expressed by fishing communities and scientists across the country that arbitrary closures, or targets for the total area of closures, based on political negotiations rather than science could have greater negative impacts to ocean conservation than no closures at all.

For conservation measures to be beneficial, they must be carefully designed for specific outcomes such as enhancing ecosystem production, protecting sensitive habitat, or preserving fish spawning activity. The public and transparent fishery management council process is the appropriate way to ensure the best available science determines such design. We must also be mindful that for a vast majority of
Americans, the only access they have to the marine resources in U.S. oceans is a direct result of the U.S. fishing industry. The Executive Order clearly states environmental and economic justice are important considerations in developing programs and policies. Reducing our abilities to provide U.S. seafood to disadvantaged communities would not further environmental and economic justice.

**Support for the Buy American Initiative**

The Biden Administration should champion the U.S. commercial fishing industry, which complies with a multitude of regulations to provide renewable protein to Americans across the country. U.S. fisheries are among the most sustainable around the world and constitute one of the lowest-carbon methods of food production. Too often we hear public misconceptions that wild harvest fisheries are on the verge of extinction or utilize destructive practices, but that is not true for U.S. based fisheries. Domestic fisheries are the most strictly regulated in the world and have rebounded extraordinarily from overfishing decades ago; failing to recognize their success only pushes consumers toward seafood from other markets with much looser environmental oversight. The coastal communities across the nation that support our fishing heritage must be protected and celebrated.

In light of the Covid-19 pandemic and staggering unemployment rates, efforts to promote jobs should be maximized across all maritime sectors and ensure that any new coastal uses benefit the U.S. economy and Americans. RODA calls on the Biden administration to work with fishing companies and crews, offshore wind supply chains, unions, and workforce development programs to create robust mechanisms that create and maintain jobs across all maritime trades.

Complementary to this, offshore wind energy development should be the poster industry for the President’s “Buy American” initiative. Current infrastructure in the U.S. does not support the manufacturing or installation of offshore wind turbine components and thus energy development companies are poised to purchase from foreign countries. For example, GE Renewable Energy, a main supplier of wind turbines and turbine parts, recently opened a new offshore wind and development center in China. The Administration should support American labor by requiring turbines, monopiles and blades be manufactured here in the U.S., ensuring that they meet our world-class environmental standards.

As small business owners reliant upon a healthy U.S. environment, our members look forward to working with the President’s appointments for the Secretaries of Commerce, Interior, and Labor. Their experience working with small communities, including coastal and fishing communities, will prove vital as we tackle some of the biggest issues facing our nation. We also look forward to working with the entire Administration on protecting and promoting sustainable U.S. seafood. RODA is committed to helping our members stay on the water and will continue to advocate for protecting the important heritage of the fishing industry and coastal communities across the country.