

United States Senate

April 28, 2021

COMMITTEES
APPROPRIATIONS
BANKING, HOUSING, AND
URBAN AFFAIRS
BUDGET
JUDICIARY
SMALL BUSINESS AND
ENTREPRENEURSHIP

The Honorable Benjamin Freidman
Acting Administrator
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
1401 Constitution Ave
Washington, DC 20230

Dear Acting Administrator Freidman,

As you know, on April 13, 2021, disaster struck Gulf Coast families when a 129-foot commercial lift boat, the Seacor Power, capsized in the Gulf of Mexico. The disaster led to the untimely deaths of many of the 19 crewmembers. For days, numerous volunteers, including the Cajun Navy, have scoured the skies and seas in an effort to locate missing crewmen. The Coast Guard, Seacor Marine's contracted divers, and brave, good Samaritans ran operations that led to the rescue of six crewmembers and the recovery of six deceased crewmen.

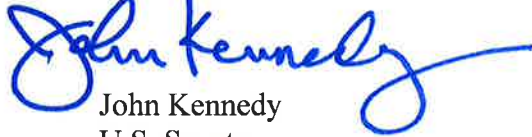
I write today to reiterate in the strongest possible terms the urgency facing these grieving Louisiana families. Mothers, fathers, wives, and children are desperately waiting for any shred of information that may shed light on their loved ones' whereabouts. Yet, from the beginning, they have encountered incredible bureaucratic red tape from public and private organizations, which may have slowed search and rescue efforts and left these families without timely search reports. Grieving families shouldn't have to demand answers to basic questions, and they should never have to wonder whether bureaucratic rules and regulations are crippling recovery efforts.

The most recent instance concerns reports that volunteers in the Cajun Navy and other organizations intend to use trawling nets to assist in recovery searches but have encountered strong opposition from NOAA related to federal regulations concerning sea turtles. If true, I urge you to immediately use your authority as Acting Administrator to assist volunteer recovery efforts and relax these regulations.

Our discussions with people on the ground indicate that NOAA is refusing to allow volunteer shrimp boats to use nets with tied Turtle Excluder Devices (TEDs) for targeted recovery operations. According to my office's communications with your agency, the fishermen involved with recovery efforts must either remove the TEDs entirely and replace their nets with costly alternatives or use methods of operations that would greatly hinder the search efforts. Even now, it remains unclear whether NOAA is allowing Louisiana shrimping boats to engage in search and rescue efforts. We simply do not have time for bureaucracy—the value of these crewmen and their grieving families demand that we prioritize their recovery above all else.

Again, I am respectfully requesting that you utilize any authority you may have as Acting Administrator of NOAA to waive regulations related to TEDs and permit Louisiana recovery volunteers to temporarily employ nets with tied TEDs. I also ask that you immediately review any other regulations that may still be hampering recovery efforts so that we can exhaust any and all solutions that would help us recover these seven missing crewmen.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "John Kennedy". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

John Kennedy
U.S. Senate