October 1, 2024

Board of County Commissioners
Okaloosa County
302 N. Wilson Street
Crestview, Florida 32536

Honorable Chairman and
Distinguished Members of the Board

On behalf of the Diving Equipment and Marketing Association (DEMA) and its affiliates including more 10,000 dive professionals, and 1,400 business members, including dive centers, manufacturers, training organizations and travel providers, we are writing to urge your support of bringing the *SS United States* to Okaloosa County Florida as an artificial reef.

Sinking ships for use in diving and fishing has proven to be great economic engine for local communities. The sinking of the *Oriskany* in 2006 off the coast of Pensacola and the sinking of the *Vandenberg* off the coast of Key West in 2009 have both generated millions in revenue and substantial tax revenues for these communities. The *Speigle Grove* in the Florida Keys has likewise generated millions in revenue. For example, the local Tourist Development Council invested $1,000,000 in 2006 for the *Oriskany*, and they have estimated that their $1 million investment was returned to them within three days following the sinking. The return on investment of sinking these vessels as attractions is estimated to be $131 for every dollar invested. I have attached some articles which followed the sinking of these vessels.

The State of Florida's artificial reef program has for many years led the world in terms of dollars generated and jobs created using artificial reefs. Extensive studies conducted by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Florida State University, and others, have borne this out. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission has been extremely active and successful in developing and supporting Florida's artificial reef program. County programs throughout Florida attempt to lure recreational fishermen, scuba divers and snorkelers by annually deploying and promoting the use of these artificial reefs.

The overwhelming successes of the *USS Oriskany, the Vandenberg* and the *USS Spiegel Grove* as artificial reefs dramatize what is possible when large ships are deployed as artificial reefs in Florida. While materials of opportunity like bridge rubble, confiscated smuggling boats etc. have proven effective as inexpensive substrate, it is the large ships that really drive tourism, which in turn drives Florida's economy. This has been amply demonstrated all over the world. The fact that once deployed these ships incur no further maintenance cost and last 75-100 years make them extremely attractive as economic development propositions.

Diving Equipment and Marketing Association • 6050 Santo Road Suite 190 • San Diego • CA • 92124
• PH: 858-616-6408 • Fax: 858-616-6495

The taxpayers of Florida are the big winners when these ships are deployed as artificial reefs. Florida's initial investment of matching funds is repaid very quickly to state and local coffers through the sale tax collected as a direct result of the tourism activity surrounding these projects.

Florida's leadership and understanding of artificial reefing, together with the mature nature of the tourism product produced in Florida combine to make the sinking of large ships a community asset valuable to all.

DEMA supports the sinking of the *SS United States* off the coast of Okaloosa County as an artificial reef, and we also commit to assisting the County in working with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and the Florida Legislature in seeking matching grants under Florida's *Ships 2 Reefs* program (Chy. 2008-100 Laws of Florida- attached).

DEMA asks that you support this project. Please let us know how we can be of assistance.

Thank you.

Sincerely,



Tom Ingram
President & CEO

cc: Bob L. Harris, Messer Caparello, Tallahassee
Legislative Affairs, DEMA

An act relating to the placement of vessels in state or federal waters seaward of the state to form artificial reefs; amending s. 370.25, F.S., relating to the state's artificial reef program; providing legislative findings; authorizing the planning and development of a statewide matching grant program to secure and place United States Maritime Administration and United States Navy decommissioned vessels in specified waters as artificial reefs; providing for administration of the program by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission; providing for implementation of the program subject to appropriations; providing objectives of the program; creating s. 370.255, F.S.; providing for the establishment of the Florida Ships-2-Reefs Program, a matching grant program, by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission; providing the purposes of the program; specifying the percentage of the state matching grant; providing procedures and requirements with respect to the program; authorizing the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission to adopt rules; providing for reports; authorizing provision of funds under the program contingent upon an appropriation; providing for a report; providing an effective date.

WHEREAS, in the past, the United States Navy has used unneeded ships as targets for military exercises known as sinking exercises, and

WHEREAS, now the Navy has devised an alternative means of

CODING: Words ~~stricken~~ are deletions; words underlined are additions

disposing of obsolete Navy vessels that allows the vessels to serve in a productive capacity for hundreds of years past their intended use, and

WHEREAS, the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2004 allows appropriate decommissioned ships to be donated for use as artificial reefing, and

WHEREAS, the process of using obsolete vessels as man-made artificial reefs not only promotes marine life and fishing but relieves pressures on natural coral reefs, and

WHEREAS, the measure allows the Navy to accomplish the overall process for the cost-effective donation and transfer of available naval vessels, and

WHEREAS, the United States Maritime Administration (MARAD) will coordinate the federal agency solicitation and application for obtaining the vessels for use as artificial reefs, and

WHEREAS, the donation and transfer application for all United States Navy and MARAD ships available for use as artificial reefs may be submitted only by states, commonwealths, and territories and possessions of the United States, or municipal corporations or political subdivisions thereof, and

WHEREAS, the placement in Florida waters of the U.S.S. Spiegel Grove in 2002 and the U.S.S. Oriskany in 2006 has already provided a substantial economic benefit to the state and to communities and businesses in the proximity of the placements, and

WHEREAS, Florida already has the Florida Maritime Heritage Trail, a collection of locations that are open to the public in Florida and which currently include six themes, those themes being Coastal Communities, Coastal Environments, Coastal Forts,

CODING: Words ~~stricken~~ are deletions; words underlined are additions

Lighthouses, Historic Ports, and Historic Shipwrecks, and

WHEREAS, this act would add a new, seventh theme to the Maritime Heritage Trail, a United States military vessel theme, and

WHEREAS, the program provides a practical option for disposing of inactive decommissioned naval vessels in a cost-effective and environmentally sound manner that can continue to promote ecotourism associated with recreational diving and fishing in Florida, NOW, THEREFORE,

Be It Enacted by the Legislature of the State of Florida:

Section 1. Subsection (8) is added to section 370.25, Florida Statutes, to read:

370.25 Artificial reef program; grants and financial and technical assistance to local governments.--

(8) The Legislature finds that a statewide matching grant program to secure and place United States Maritime Administration (MARAD) and United States Navy decommissioned vessels in state or federal waters seaward of the state as artificial reefs would be of great benefit to Floridians in promoting ecotourism associated with recreational diving and fishing in Florida. Therefore, the Legislature authorizes the planning and development of a statewide matching grant program as described in this subsection to be administered by the commission. The program will be implemented subject to appropriations. The objectives in establishing the program are to:

(a) Assist in reducing the pressures on natural coral reefs in state or federal waters seaward of the state and increase the

CODING: Words ~~stricken~~ are deletions; words underlined are additions

opportunities for recreational diving and fishing.

(b) Provide a mechanism through which counties and municipalities that are permitted to place vessels in state or federal waters seaward of the state as artificial reefs can apply for and receive state matching grants for the placement of decommissioned MARAD and United States Navy vessels. Funds may be used for cleaning, preparing, towing, and sinking of such decommissioned vessels.

(c) Provide state funds that would be matched with local funds, federal funds, and funds from local businesses.

(d) Establish criteria to determine eligibility for such state matching funds.

(e) Assist counties and municipalities with the donation and transfer application for United States Navy and MARAD decommissioned vessels available for use as artificial reefs in accordance with MARAD application evaluation criteria.

(f) Develop a master plan for the purposes of maximizing the number and type of vessels to be placed in state or federal waters seaward of the state that provides for the location of vessels in the most geographically effective and beneficial manner.

(g) Establish and promote standards for the placement of MARAD and United States Navy decommissioned vessels in state or federal waters seaward of the state, consistent with current environmental standards and the mandate of Section 3516 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2004 and the 2006 publication, "National Guidance: Best Management Practices for Preparing Vessels Intended to Create Artificial Reefs," published jointly by the United States Environmental Protection

CODING: Words ~~stricken~~ are deletions; words underlined are additions

Agency and the United States Maritime Administration, which emphasized minimization of the release of harmful substances into the environment while decommissioned vessels are at anchorage and are undergoing disposal processes.

(h) Provide for and receive interagency comments from the agencies responsible for the permitting of artificial reefs and the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, allowing for a review period consistent with MARAD and United States Navy application deadlines.

(i) Establish a United States military vessel component as a seventh theme for Florida's Maritime Heritage Trail to promote Florida's nature-based tourism and heritage tourism.

(j) Provide for title of decommissioned vessels to be transferred to the state.

Section 2. Section 370.255, Florida Statutes, is created to read:

370.255 Florida Ships-2-Reefs Program; matching grant requirements.--

(1) The commission is authorized to establish the Florida Ships-2-Reefs Program, a matching grant program, for the securing and placement of United States Maritime Administration (MARAD) and United States Navy decommissioned vessels in state or federal waters seaward of the state to serve as artificial reefs and, pursuant thereto, to make expenditures and enter into contracts with local governments and nonprofit corporations for the purpose of securing and placing MARAD and United States Navy decommissioned vessels as artificial reefs in state or federal waters seaward of the state pursuant to s. 370.25(8) and performing the environmental preparation and cleaning requisite

CODING: Words ~~stricken~~ are deletions; words underlined are additions

to the placement of a vessel as an artificial reef, which preparation and cleaning must meet the standards established in the 2006 publication, "National Guidance: Best Management Practices for Preparing Vessels Intended to Create Artificial Reefs," published jointly by the United States Environmental Protection Agency and the United States Maritime Administration. The commission shall have final approval of grants awarded through the program.

(2) Each grant awarded under the program shall be matched by nonstate funds. The limit for a state matching grant shall be 33 percent of the total cost for securing and placing the decommissioned vessel and performing the requisite environmental preparation and cleaning which meets the standards cited in subsection (1) prior to placement of the vessel.

(3) The commission may:

(a) Receive submissions of requests for matching funds and documentation relating to those requests;

(b) Approve requests for matching funds; and

(c) Allocate matching funds to local governments or nonprofit corporations.

(4) To demonstrate that a local government or nonprofit corporation meets the required criteria, the local government or nonprofit corporation must submit formal agreements, written pledges, memorandums of understanding, financing arrangements, or other documents demonstrating that nonstate matching funds are available for securing and placing the vessel prior to submission of an application. Matching grant funds shall be released only upon documentation that meets all the criteria established in rules adopted by the commission pursuant to subsection (5).

CODING: Words ~~stricken~~ are deletions; words underlined are additions

(5) The commission is authorized to adopt rules pursuant to ss. 120.536(1) and 120.54 to address procedures necessary to administer the matching grants provided in this section.

(6) No later than January 1, 2009, and each January 1 thereafter, the commission shall submit a report to the Governor, the President of the Senate, and the Speaker of the House of Representatives detailing the expenditure of the funds appropriated to it for the purposes of carrying out the provisions of this section.

Section 3. This act shall take upon becoming a law.

CODING: Words ~~stricken~~ are deletions; words underlined are additions