

March 25, 2020

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker of the House
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
Minority Leader
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Chuck Schumer
Minority Leader
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Re: Domestic Seafood Infrastructure

Dear Leader McConnell, Leader Schumer, Speaker Pelosi, and Leader McCarthy:

We write as participants in America's seafood supply chain, a critical component of the country's domestic food infrastructure and one of the major economic drivers in our country's coastal communities and states.

Empty restaurants, cafes, and dining halls are a visible reminder of the ongoing, unprecedented public health efforts to blunt the spread of COVID-19. The livelihoods of the chefs, cooks, servers, and other staff are obvious and direct casualties of those government efforts. The economic disruption caused by forced restaurant closures and active encouragement for Americans to "shelter in place," however, extend far beyond the food service sector.

There is a direct line from those temporarily shuttered businesses to the food distribution chain that supports them; the companies and workers who harvest, farm, prepare, process, package, and distribute the food products that we produce in our country. The Department of Homeland Security rightly recognized in its March 19 memorandum that seafood workers are "essential critical infrastructure workers" that warrant prioritization in government support to help protect and maintain our role in food security.

In the case of seafood, more than two-thirds (68%) of the \$102.2 billion that consumers paid for U.S. fishery products in 2017 was spent at food service establishments (as opposed to home consumption). As a result, in many fisheries, the sudden near shutdown of restaurants and other storefronts has caused demand to evaporate overnight, threatening the continued economic viability of the entire supply chain. This could mean the loss of tens of thousands of well-paying jobs. In those fisheries where demand remains intact, the greatest ongoing challenge will be to make sure employers have state and local support for undergoing testing, screening, and potential quarantine protocols needed to ensure a healthy workforce. Without workers, healthy and sustainable fisheries would produce only a fraction of their potential. Congress and the Administration must work with state and local governments in that regard.

As you have heard from other industries, supply chains cannot be turned on and off like a light switch. Once lost, a supply chain and the infrastructure that supports it can be exceptionally difficult and costly to restart. Failure to act boldly now to preserve our country's domestic seafood infrastructure will impose far greater costs on our economy and cause permanent damage to our nation's ability to harvest, farm, process, and distribute seafood products.

Though we write specifically on behalf of our country's seafood infrastructure, we expect that the bold actions we are suggesting would help stave off disaster for food supply industries as a whole. Our domestic food distribution network produces nearly \$700 billion in revenue annually, and employs nearly 1.5 million workers. The value of specialty crops annually is about \$65 billion, and the value of processed fish products is about \$12 billion annually. Food manufacturing tends to have relatively high payments to salaries and benefits compared with other food sector industries, with salaries and benefits accounting for half of the value added in food manufacturing.

Bipartisan efforts to keep Americans safe from COVID-19 and to deliver much-needed assistance to the most vulnerable among us are absolutely appropriate. We applaud the efforts of Congress to extend unemployment insurance and to address the needs of seniors, children, and other vulnerable Americans. However, with an uncertain timeline ahead of us in this crisis, we must also take additional bold action to preserve the operating liquidity of the food production employers who provide and support domestic food infrastructure and the millions of jobs it supports. Failure to do so risks unprecedented decline in essential economic activity that will severely affect both workers and our nation's ability to continue feeding itself.

To mitigate the impacts of the public health response to COVID-19 and maintain our critical industry, we call on Congress to take the following actions. To be clear, suggested dollars amounts should be considered a starting point to address the still unknown impacts of this evolving crisis:

1. **Ensure USDA's Section 32 funding levels are maintained (regardless of whether tariff revenues are diminished) and expand to include an additional appropriation of at least \$2.0 billion for Section 32 activities that directly support the supply chain of domestically produced seafood to end consumers.** This existing mechanism could keep workers employed, supply chains operating, employers open, and nutritional needs met. The program provides for the government purchase of food for consumers, starting with kids and vulnerable families. For over 80 years, the Section 32 program has provided assistance to food products, the production and distribution of which is generally not supported by larger price support programs.

We also request that you consider granting authority to the Departments of Agriculture and Commerce to expedite purchases with such additional funds by temporarily suspending federal contracting rules and regulations so as to facilitate immediate assistance to a broader cross section of U.S. businesses, free from bureaucratic red tape that might otherwise delay relief.

2. **Provide an initial \$1.5 billion to the Department of Commerce to provide direct relief for fishery disasters caused by Federal, State, and Local government responses to COVID-19.** Sections 312(a) and 315 of the Magnuson Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA) and the Sections 308(b) and 308(d) Interjurisdictional Fisheries Act (IFJ) empower the Secretary of Commerce to provide multiple forms of relief to businesses and fishing communities impacted by certain harms—including natural and man-made causes. We request that Congress appropriate and permit the Secretary to make funding available as soon as practicable to fishery and seafood businesses uniquely impacted by closure of restaurant and food service industries, and specifically designate the spread and impact of COVID-19 as a natural and man-made cause eligible for fishery disaster assistance. To ensure funding can be distributed quickly, we also request that Congress allow the Secretary to waive certain requirements under MSA and IFJ for this funding, so that injured businesses can quickly access needed aid. Congress should also direct administrative agencies to immediately release all previously appropriated disaster relief funds so as to inject direct liquidity to coastal employers.
3. **Appropriate a minimum of \$500 million for the Secretary of Commerce, in consultation with the Department of Agriculture, to purchase surplus commercial seafood that can be shipped overseas or supplied to domestic organizations.** These organizations could include assisted living communities, hospitals, as well as State and Local government programs, among others. Facilitating direct government purchase of products that have gone unsold due to the government's unprecedented response to the COVID-19 crisis would both ensure stability in this key sector and provide healthy proteins for Americans.

Thank you for your attention to these well-intended policy recommendations. We will continue to offer suggestions to promote economic security and stability for America's food production infrastructure as the current health situation abates. Commercial fishing and seafood interests are highly diverse between

regions, so additional assistance may be needed to address near-term critical needs for some parts of the seafood value chain.

Please do not hesitate to contact the signatories below if we can be of additional assistance in our nation's effort to combat this crisis, while preserving the essential infrastructure that underlies our economy.

Sincerely,



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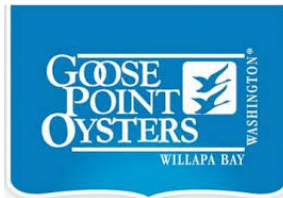
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