

United States Senate

April 1, 2020

The Honorable Wilbur Ross
Secretary
U.S. Department of Commerce
Room 5421
Fourteenth Street and Constitution Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20230

Dear Secretary Ross,

The *Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act* includes \$300 million in funding for fisheries disaster assistance. As our nation's fishing industry navigates the unprecedented health and economic crisis caused by the spread of the novel coronavirus, we urge you to act swiftly, equitably, and with transparency in providing this assistance to impacted fisheries.

The fishing and seafood industries are essential drivers of the American economy, with \$5.6 billion worth of fisheries products landed and \$11.6 billion worth of fisheries products processed in 2018.¹ The COVID-19 outbreak has caused restaurants across the United States to shutter, eliminating a key customer base for the fishing and seafood industries. Large export markets in virus-affected countries like China have also been disrupted.

The Department of Commerce will play a significant role in allocating and distributing *CARES Act* funds. Under the *CARES Act*, eligibility for fisheries disaster assistance requires meeting a 35-percent revenue loss threshold. In assessing that loss, there are many complex variables for the Department, and its National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), to consider. These include the seasonality of different fisheries, the timeliness of incoming revenue data, and the diversity of affected markets. Whether and when companies should begin to prepare and submit documents establishing that they meet the 35-percent revenue are also open questions.

NOAA can help the fisheries industry navigate these challenges and questions through an open and accessible process. It could include webinar listening sessions with fishery participants; virtual meetings with state fishery directors, councils and commissions; or other similar, transparent measures. We urge you to ensure that fishing industry voices are heard, and that *CARES Act* funds are fairly and equitably allocated and distributed.

This process must also move efficiently and ensure that funds are quickly distributed. Previous fisheries disaster relief efforts such as the 2005 New England red tide federal disaster took two

¹ NOAA Fisheries, *Fisheries of the United States, 2018* (Feb. 21, 2020), <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/feature-story/fisheries-united-states-2018>.

years and created a cash flow problem for those anticipating help.² We cannot afford similar delays during this crisis. Setting up an equitable process from the beginning will help ensure the rapid allocation of funds.

These are dire times for the fishing and seafood industries. Many fisheries are shut down because there is no market for their fish. Seafood processors are struggling because closed restaurants are no longer buying fresh products. This vital \$300 million in aid will help American fishermen avoid going bankrupt at the dock. As you work towards distributing it, we stand ready to help in any way we can.

If you have any questions about this request, please contact James LaChance on my staff at james_lachance@markey.senate.gov.

Sincerely,


Edward J. Markey
United States Senator


Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator

Cc: Dr. Neil Jacobs, NOAA Acting Administrator

Cc: Chris Oliver, Assistant Administrator for NOAA Fisheries

² Patrick Anderson, *Feds acknowledge 'fishery failure' due to red tide algae*, Newburyport News (Nov. 18, 2008), https://www.newburyportnews.com/news/local_news/feds-acknowledge-fishery-failure-due-to-red-tide-algae/article_41e69012-c367-50ca-b8c1-cf2b12c7f2b9.html.