April 23, 2020

The Honorable Wilbur Ross  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Commerce  
1401 Constitution Avenue NW  
Washington, D.C. 20230

Dear Secretary Ross,

We write today on behalf of our 18 member groups and thousands of fishermen from Alaska to Maine. We are proud stewards and harvesters of America’s seafood, a critical component of our country’s food security, especially during this time. As our nation reels in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, we continue to work hard providing fresh and frozen fish to consumers. However, drastic supply chain disruptions resulting from restaurant closures and limited or no grocery markets for fresh fish has inflicted staggering economic losses for the commercial fishing industry. We call upon the Department of Commerce and NOAA to clearly articulate their distribution process for the $300 million in fisheries assistance funds to ensure it is public and transparent. We also request the funds be expeditiously disbursed to the eligible recipients once this process is developed.

We strongly urge NOAA and the Department of Commerce to make the disbursement process for the $300 million in fisheries assistance public and transparent. The industry has not, thus far, been made aware of any process NOAA is considering to allocate these funds despite repeated requests from industry stakeholders and Members of Congress. We are concerned that this lack of transparency will result in a process that does not adequately account for fishermen’s economic needs.

Once this process has been outlined, we urge Agency and Commerce officials to disburse these funds as quickly as possible. Many of the domestic and international markets commercial fishermen depend on for the sale of their catch have been drastically reduced or have disappeared altogether. Approximately 70% of the money spent on seafood in 2017 in the United States was spent on seafood consumed at restaurants, cafeterias, and through catering services. As these businesses have shuttered, our fishing businesses have also suffered. The U.S. is a global leader in sustainable seafood, but without an immediate lifeline, we risk losing the fishermen, the fishing businesses, and the associated working waterfronts that have made our commercial fishing industry the gold standard. Furthermore, the commercial fishing industry is the economic backbone in many coastal communities and without a strong fishing industry, many of these

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coastal communities will face enormous financial challenges. It is imperative this money reach qualified recipients quickly.

As the economic impacts of this pandemic continue to mount, access to capital to keep the lights on and the boats running is critical. The $300 million appropriated in the CARES Act is only the start to helping the commercial fishing industry stay afloat during this pandemic and continue to supply fresh, sustainable seafood for the American people. Any future dollars appropriated will need to be quickly disbursed to the fishing industry, which is why the process you set forth in this initial round is so important.

We strongly urge the Department of Commerce and NOAA to provide transparency in the development of the process to allocate the $300 million in fisheries assistance so that the commercial fishing industry can understand how to appropriately access those funds. Getting this process correct will allow for the subsequent disbursement of funds to happen efficiently now and with any additional funding appropriated in the future.

Thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully,

Leigh Habegger
Executive Director

Robert Dooley
President

Alaska Bering Sea Crabbers • Alaska Whitefish Trawlers Association • Cape Cod Commercial Fishermen’s Alliance • Cordova District Fishermen United • Fishermen’s Marketing Association • Fishing Vessel Owners’ Association • Fort Bragg Groundfish Association • Georges Bank Cod Fixed Gear Sector • Gulf Fishermen’s Association • Gulf of Mexico Reef Fish Shareholders’ Alliance • Maine Coast Fishermen’s Association • Midwater Trawlers Cooperative • New Hampshire Community Seafood • North Pacific Fisheries Association • Purse Seine Vessel Owners’ Association • Rhode Island Commercial Fishermen’s Association • South Atlantic Fishermen’s Association • United Catcher Boats

Cc: Paul Doremus, Deputy Assistant Administrator for Operations
    Chris Oliver, Assistant Administrator for Fisheries