



Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

March 31, 2021

President Joe Biden
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20006

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary, U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20250

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

Dear President Biden, Secretary Vilsack, and Secretary Raimondo:

We are pleased that USDA has provided a comment period to receive feedback on the \$1.5 billion authorized by the *Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021* for grants and loans to food processors, distributors, seafood processing facilities, processing vessels, farmers markets, producers, and other organizations to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. As Members who represent coastal districts or areas with a strong seafood and fishing presence, we are writing to provide feedback on how seafood – both aquaculture and fresh-caught – and their related industries have been impacted by COVID-19. We urge you to take these issues into consideration as you continue using all existing authorities to assist the seafood industry as it recovers from the pandemic.

Shellfish and Seafood Purchasing Programs

Regarding the shellfish and fishing communities, we write to strongly encourage USDA to consider regional price differences when purchasing a commodity in any federal purchase program. In New England, for example, certain shellfish prices may be naturally higher than in the Southeastern part of the country. Additionally, we believe that a seafood purchasing program, if done correctly, could stabilize prices and create a strong recovery. If the purchasing program focused on U.S. harvested and U.S. processed seafood, that would create even more resiliency in

the sector and enable those in need to consume American-caught seafood at home.

Shellfish Industry Seed Purchases

Additionally, the shellfish community and hatcheries took an enormous financial hit during the COVID-19 pandemic. If USDA establishes a grant program for this industry, we recommend that these grants include funds for smaller growers to buy seed from the hatcheries. Small growers may only have a handful of employees and providing grants to these growers to purchase seed for the coming season would provide stability and resilience to the industry as it recovers from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Given the fluctuating cash flow that shellfish growers have, many are relying on savings since they operate on a multi-year cycle to grow their product. Grants to maintain cash flow and purchase seed on this multi-year timeframe will be enormously helpful to this industry, as many growers cannot take on additional debt at this time. A grant program of this nature could be modeled on the amount of seed purchased in a given year or the amount spent on seed purchases. To this end, a grant covering at least 30-40% of the purchase price of seed would be the sort of targeted relief that this industry needs and would help them weather future challenges.

Infrastructure and Resiliency Support for the Shellfish Industry

To further increase resiliency in the shellfish sector, we believe that USDA should also provide resources, including grants, to help the shellfish industry continue direct marketing. Few shellfish growers were engaged in direct marketing efforts before the COVID-19 pandemic, but, with the closure of restaurants, many growers shifted to direct to consumer sales to keep their businesses operating. Grants to help shellfish growers purchase equipment, including refrigerated units, would enable the sector to continue direct marketing and provide more locally grown seafood to consumers. Additionally, direct marketing grants could also include value-added product development, grants for processing facilities to start up in new regions, and grants for the expansion of existing processing facilities. COVID-19 has made it clear how a lack of processing capacity has severely interrupted our supply chain, and grants to help processors expand so that shucked or packaged shellfish products are more readily available could serve an important role in maintaining these supply chains in the future and preventing food waste. Infrastructure support for adjusting to a more diversified industry and creating better resiliency in the shellfish supply chain are important institutional reforms necessary to protect against future price collapses and supply chain problems.

Interagency Collaboration and Face-to-Face Visits to Shellfish Growers

The shellfish industry also recognizes that different USDA offices have had different definitions of eligibility for programs impacting shellfish growers. To this end, we believe that having representatives from the Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS), Risk Management Agency (RMA), and Farm Service Agency (FSA) all involved in these conversations – and visiting

shellfish growers simultaneously – would pay enormous dividends. We welcome AMS, RMA, and FSA to visit our shellfish growers and learn about the work they do face-to-face. In the past, officials from AMS, RMA, or FSA have visited growers separately, resulting in insufficient communication between the various offices at USDA that work with the shellfish industry. We strongly recommend that USDA coordinate future visits with multiple officials from each agency arriving together.

Fishing Community Resilience & Infrastructure Investments

In addition to the work USDA is doing to provide grant, loan, and other opportunities to shellfish growers, we also have feedback on the needs of the fishing industry during the COVID-19 pandemic.

As you may be aware, fishing is a dangerous industry. Many local fishermen are operating on boats that are decades old and they often do not have the ability to invest in growing their business or passing them along to the next generation. To create more fishing industry resilience, we believe that USDA should consider providing funds for training and certifications to fishermen or partnering with other federal agencies on this, allowing them to invest in their education, their fleet, and their equipment. Many of these docks are also heavily reliant on diesel engine boats and equipment that create air and water pollution.

Additionally, in many of our communities, our fishermen are using antiquated unloading facilities to bring the product from the boats to the shore. Infrastructure investments for unloading and handling facilities would help ensure that our fishermen can quickly bring their catch in locally. Rapid unloading facilities are a commonsense way to modernize the industry and strengthen domestic seafood infrastructure.

Infrastructure upgrades in the fishing industry will help keep those doing this critical work safe and protect against future tragedies which could have been avoided with the proper equipment. These efforts will also help increase the attractiveness of fishing and aid in recruiting the next generation of fishermen and women.

Program Similar to/Modeled on USDA Seafood Trade Relief Assistance

Due to COVID-19 and the subsequent decline of the restaurant industry, seafood producers experienced significant price difficulties, as most seafood in our country is consumed in restaurants. Because of the shrinking domestic market due to COVID-19, prices for certain products, including squid, dropped by almost 50% and most product fishermen brought in was then exported overseas and subject to tariffs. USDA's Seafood Trade Relief Program allowed vessels to receive rates per pound to make up for the tariffs on products. Modeling a future relief program on the success of the USDA Seafood Trade Relief Assistance would be very helpful for our producers, wholesalers, and processors.

Seafood Processing

In the interests of keeping more seafood production in the United States, which would maintain our national competitiveness and create more sector resilience during future challenges, we believe that USDA should provide additional grants for processing equipment, either for vessels or plants, to expand the domestic processing of seafood. Having domestic processing capabilities will expand our U.S. supply chain, ensure fresh, local products are reaching people quickly, curb greenhouse gas emissions, and ensure that our fishermen are not catching seafood here only to send it internationally for processing before being consumed back in the United States.

COVID-19 exposed an overreliance within the seafood industry on restaurants. This is particularly the case for many states in our region where the lower volume and higher prices of seafood fillets, along with a lack of supply chain infrastructure, mean fishermen must sell to restaurants that can use their fresh product quickly. USDA should help the seafood industry to diversify its end markets by providing funding for operations such as cold storage, filleting, canning, packaging, and distribution transportation.

Relief and Nutrition Initiatives

We believe these proposals would help to grow the U.S. seafood industry, but also allow more fishermen to benefit from USDA crisis programs, such as The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), which has played a central role in USDA's COVID-relief efforts for American food producers and the hungry. Though USDA is trying to add more seafood products to the list of TEFAP food stuffs, fishermen and shellfish farmers have been unable to access this important relief program due to the lack of packaging capability.

This also means many Americans that rely on food banks and prepared meal organizations are denied healthy seafood as part of their diet. USDA should give grants and technical assistance to hunger organizations so they can purchase the infrastructure and obtain the necessary certifications, if needed, to safely work with seafood purchased from local fishermen. Schools, particularly those located within fishery communities, are also an excellent potential end market for local seafood. According to USDA, children require omega-3 fatty acids, which are found in seafood, for brain, eye, and nerve development. Income should not be a barrier to receiving the nutritional benefits of seafood.

Consumer Marketing

We believe national marketing would provide significant assistance to the industry and help encourage more consumers to purchase healthy seafood for home consumption, as opposed to only or primarily eating it in restaurants, especially as consumers have changed behaviors due to the pandemic. Because seafood products are seasonal, marketing and promoting U.S. seafood in season would create even more resiliency for the sector. Additionally, these efforts would empower consumers, who may have become more concerned about supply chains during COVID-19, to use their purchasing power to support domestic fishermen. Direct-to-consumer

sales have helped many seafood producers weather the pandemic, and USDA could build on those efforts through additional marketing resources.

Outreach to Stakeholders

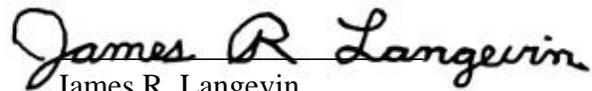
Finally, we thank the USDA for their stakeholder outreach up to this point and request that additional outreach be conducted with stakeholder groups to ensure that pandemic assistance is structured in a way that is appropriate and beneficial for these industries. Recognizing that seafood stakeholders must engage with numerous federal agencies, we request that USDA appoint a seafood point-person and prioritize coordination with NOAA, USTR, FDA, and other relevant agencies to support the long-term success of the seafood sector. This includes outreach to seafood producers in urban metro areas and small-boat fisheries, such as co-ops that participate only in local markets. As Members of the impacted regions, we stand by to assist you in facilitating those conversations with our constituent stakeholders.

Thank you for your consideration of our request.

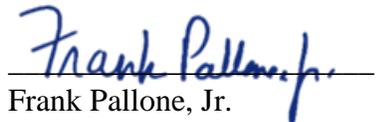
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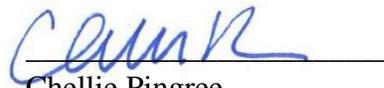
Joe Courtney
Member of Congress



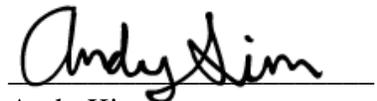
James R. Langevin
Member of Congress



Frank Pallone, Jr.
Member of Congress



Chellie Pingree
Member of Congress



Andy Kim
Member of Congress