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June 12, 2020

The Honorable Wilbur L. Ross, Jr.
Secretary of Commerce
United States Department of Commerce
1401 Constitution Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20230

The Honorable Sonny Perdue
Secretary of Agriculture
United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Perdue and Secretary Ross:

I am writing today to request your immediate assistance to assist aquaculture producers in Connecticut who are facing severe economic hardship due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

As you know, the Coronavirus Food Assistance Program (CFAP) allows agricultural producers to apply for direct payments to offset impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic. To be eligible for CFAP, agricultural producers must have suffered a 5% or greater price decline between mid-January and mid-April due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Unfortunately, as published in a document through the NOAA Sea Grant, it is now clear that privately owned aquaculture businesses growing products in state or federal marine waters (including all molluscan shellfish and marine algae) will *not* be covered through CFAP, and instead will only be permitted to receive assistance through the Department of Commerce's \$300 million in fisheries assistance. Although I commend NOAA for making these funds readily available to eligible states, territories, and tribes, I remain concerned as to why ocean-farmed shellfish were excluded from CFAP, and additionally, as to the NOAA formula for providing these funds to the eligible entities, given that the amount of NOAA assistance to Connecticut is far below the scope of the overall need.

Connecticut will receive approximately \$1.8 million in total funds from NOAA under this program, which will be divided between commercial fishing, shellfish, wholesale, and recreational fishing. After these resources have been distributed, the entire shellfish industry in Connecticut will receive approximately \$450,000 in assistance, which will be spread very thinly throughout our state's \$30 million aquaculture industry. Only three states and three U.S. territories received fewer funds from NOAA than Connecticut. For example, in comparison to our neighboring states of Massachusetts and Rhode Island, Connecticut received less than 60% of the funds allocated to Rhode Island, and less than 7% of the funds allotted to Massachusetts.

The formula that NOAA has utilized to distribute these funds has been opaque and puts Connecticut's shellfish industry in real financial jeopardy.

I also remain concerned about new and existing food purchase and donation programs at USDA that fail to include shellfish, despite the significant losses to the industry. Specifically, USDA has failed to include shellfish in the Farmers to Families Food Box Program, including shelf-stable canned products. During a recent call with USDA staff, the House Education & Labor Committee, and the House Agricultural Committee, my staff asked a question about why aquaculture was not included in the Farmers to Families Food Boxes program. My staff was informed that purchasing seafood was simply not something that the agency typically did. Given that shellfish aquaculture has been one of the hardest-hit industries during this economic and public health crisis, this response is unacceptable.

Nationally, the molluscan shellfish industry has had losses greater than 90% in sales and contracts. Additionally, due to restaurant closures in New York, Connecticut, and Massachusetts to stem the spread of COVID-19, there was a near halt in aquaculture sales throughout Connecticut over the past several months. In my state, the average reduction in revenue in 2020 after COVID-19 restrictions were put in place was 93%, compared to 2019. Additionally, more than 70% of the Connecticut aquaculture workforce has been laid off during this time.

Given the dire need for this assistance and the failure of current programs to meet this need, I have several requests.

1. How do USDA and NOAA plan to help the shellfish industry moving forward?
2. What is the rationale that USDA used to determine that certain freshwater producers would be eligible for CFAP but that saltwater shellfish producers would not be eligible?
3. What formula did NOAA utilize to distribute the \$300 million in funds to local communities?

Additionally, I would like to request a briefing from both NOAA and USDA on this topic for myself or my staff. Thank you in advance for your consideration of this request.

Sincerely,


JOE COURTNEY
Member of Congress

CC:

The Honorable Dr. Neil Jacobs
Assistant Secretary of Commerce,
Environmental Observation and Prediction
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
1401 Constitution Avenue NW, Room 5128
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