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2ND DISTRICT, VIRGINIA

HOUSE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE

VICE CHAIR OF SUBCOMMITTEE ON SEAPOWER AND PROJECTION FORCES

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
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HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

CHAIR OF SUBCOMMITTEE ON DISABILITY ASSISTANCE AND MEMORIAL AFFAIRS

May 13, 2020

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

Dear Secretary Ross:

We write to express concern over the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA)'s plan for disbursing fisheries relief funding under the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act and urge you to take immediate action to provide additional support for Virginia's fisheries industries.

Section 12005 of the CARES Act directed the Department of Commerce to distribute $300 million to fishery industry businesses negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. More than a month after its passage, NOAA released its plan for distributing these funds on May 7, 2020. Under this plan, Virginia will receive approximately $4.5 million, or 1.5% of the total allocation. We believe that this amount significantly undervalues Virginia's contribution to the national seafood industry.

According to NOAA's 2018 Fisheries of the United States report, Virginia's commercial landings total $177 million, or 3.2% of the total dollar amount of U.S. commercial landings. According to the same report, Virginia is home to approximately 1,850 seafood processing and wholesale workers, or 3% of the nation's total.[1] Further, according to the USDA's 2018 Census of Aquaculture, Virginia growers had sales of over $112 million, worth 7.4% of the nation's total aquaculture sales.[2] NOAA's current allocation formula means that Virginia watermen will receive far less per dollar of aquaculture sales and commercial fishery landings and less per seafood processing and wholesale worker than individuals in other states.

We are also concerned that NOAA's allocation decision does not reflect the losses Virginia watermen have faced as a result of this pandemic because of the nature of their catch. Shellfish growers, who make up more than 80% of Virginia's aquaculture industry, face unique logistical and consumer preference barriers to shifting their production from restaurants to grocery stores, and thus may have exceptionally high losses compared to other fishery industry businesses. On a

[1] https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/resource/document/fisheries-united-states-2018-report
[2] https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2017/Online_Resources/Aquaculture/Aqua.pdf

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May 8, 2020 call with representatives from congressional offices, however, NOAA staff confirmed that their allocation formula does not consider actual or estimated losses as a result of the pandemic.

We recognize that hard choices must be made with limited resources; however, the current 1.5% allocation for Virginia watermen is not nearly enough. In order to provide relief commensurate with the size of the Virginia commercial fishery and aquaculture industry, providing at least $10 million in CARES fisheries funding to Virginia would be appropriate, based on the contribution of Virginia's fisheries to the national catch. We also respectfully request that NOAA make fully available the metrics used to determine its allocation of funding and that it revise its revenue allocation to account for actual or estimated losses as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Thank you for your prompt attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

Elaine G. Luria
Member of Congress

Robert C. "Bobby" Scott
Member of Congress

Robert J. Wittman
Member of Congress

Gerald E. Connolly
Member of Congress

A. Donald McEachin
Member of Congress

/s/
Jennifer Wexton
Member of Congress