

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20510

April 9, 2021

Secretary Thomas Vilsack
United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20250-0110

Dear Secretary Vilsack,

Commercial fishing and the seafood processing industry on the West Coast are substantial contributors to overall U.S. seafood production and essential components of America's coastal economy. On average, commercial fishermen on the West Coast deliver more than \$500 million in ex-vessel value per annum, accounting for 13% of the value of total U.S. seafood production. A quarter of all American seafood processing and wholesale jobs are located in Washington, Oregon, and California, representing the largest employment opportunity among all seafood-producing regions in the U.S. The domestic seafood sector is also a critically important component of America's food production system, supporting more than 1.2 million jobs, generating more than \$144 billion in sales impacts, and contributing more than \$61 billion to the nation's gross domestic product. Commercial seafood production plays a particularly important role in rural coastal communities, where it is often the single largest contributor to local economies.

As you know, the ongoing public health crisis related to the COVID-19 pandemic has caused an economic disaster throughout the U.S. economy. These economic disruptions have been particularly acute for the seafood industry. Notably, more than 68% of the \$102.2 billion that consumers paid for U.S. fishery products in 2017 was spent at food service establishments. The sudden and near-total loss of that market in March 2020 decimated virtually overnight the demand for U.S.-sourced seafood products, and the accompanying disruption in export markets and global supply chains has placed additional strain on domestic seafood infrastructure. Even as COVID-19 vaccines have started to be administered, significant economic impacts to the seafood sector continue. According to the National Restaurant Association, nearly one in five restaurants in the U.S. has closed long-term or permanently due to the pandemic. With those that remain often operating under limited circumstances, revenues continue to slide, and over 80% of restaurants recently surveyed expect revenues to continue to decline in the first three months of 2021.

During these unprecedented times, USDA's procurement programs are critical to filling an incredibly important void – one that ensures that food production essential workers stay employed, supply chains keep operating, and America's nutritional needs are met. We appreciate USDA's efforts to date to expand its long-standing purchasing programs to include seafood products from various U.S. regions. However, thus far, few of the procurements have focused on purchases of seafood products from the West Coast.

We thus request that USDA include as part of its commodity purchasing programs the purchase of Pacific Northwest and West Coast seafood products that are currently being produced in large volumes, easily accessible, and easily transportable for immediate distribution to food assistance programs. Purchase of these products by USDA would help the fishing and seafood processing industries, and the coastal communities that rely on them, recover from an unprecedented pandemic, just as other purchases in the past year have helped other regions.

Thank you for your work, and for your consideration of our request.

Sincerely,

/s/ Jeffrey A. Merkley
Jeffrey A. Merkley
U.S. Senator

/s/ Ron Wyden
Ron Wyden
U.S. Senator

/s/ Patty Murray
Patty Murray
U.S. Senator

/s/ Alex Padilla
Alex Padilla
U.S. Senator

/s/ Kurt Schrader
Kurt Schrader
U.S. Representative

/s/ Peter A. DeFazio
Peter A. Defazio
U.S. Representative

/s/ Jared Huffman
Jared Huffman
U.S. Representative

/s/ Suzanne Bonamici
Suzanne Bonamici
U.S. Representative

/s/ Earl Blumenauer
Earl Blumenauer
U.S. Representative

/s/ Derek Kilmer
Derek Kilmer
U.S. Senator