

U.S. Senate Commerce Committee

Hearing to Examine Building a Stronger and More Resilient Seafood Sector

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Testimony of

Cora Campbell, North Pacific Fishery Management Council Member
and President and CEO, Silver Bay Seafoods

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today on the impacts of COVID-19 on the Alaska seafood industry and what's needed to build a stronger and more resilient seafood sector. My name is Cora Campbell, and I'm here today as a member of the North Pacific Fishery Management Council. I'm also President and CEO of Silver Bay Seafoods, an Alaskan seafood processor with operations across the state of Alaska including Bristol Bay, False Pass, Kodiak, Prince William Sound, and Southeast Alaska. The North Pacific Council manages the majority of fisheries in the U.S., supporting a strong commercial fishing industry, culture, and community and providing critical food security for America.

Speaking as a Council member, a great concern to the Council this year was the cancellation of five of six large-scale NOAA assessment surveys in federal waters off Alaska due to COVID-19. These surveys serve as our fundamental data source to support groundfish stock assessments and ecosystem assessments and are NOAA's most critical responsibility to meet its mission of monitoring the health and sustainability of living marine resources and their habitat. To be clear, these surveys are our primary data source to support fishing at optimum yield and directly impact the amount of fish that we can harvest – the less uncertainty there is, the greater the harvest potential.

The Council is concerned with the potential consequences of not conducting surveys in 2020 due to COVID-19 challenges, which will be even more severe if 2021 surveys are not completed. At our June meeting, our scientific advisors noted that loss of the 2020 surveys will increase uncertainty in stock status and projections. This may result in more conservative harvest levels, particularly for crab, Alaska pollock, Pacific cod, and some rockfish species. These are primary species in the North Pacific, encompassing valuable crab stocks, and groundfish species that comprise more than 82% of our total harvests in the Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands. Rapidly changing distributions and populations in recent years, particularly for Alaska pollock and Pacific cod, increases the importance of the baseline NOAA survey effort.

The Council is hopeful that our long survey time series and NOAA's investments in modeling and other data sources will temper the effect of one missing survey year but completing 2021 surveys is an imperative. The Council has been clear that the full suite of core surveys for 2021 would necessitate 5 to 6 vessels to cover three geographies: one vessel for the Northern Bering Sea; two vessels for the Eastern Bering Sea, and 2 to 3 vessels for the Gulf of Alaska. We recently sent a request to NOAA for a survey plan for 2021 that includes all of our planned core surveys, and that provides for COVID-19 contingencies related to vessel operations and labor, as well as a plan for funding. We need a robust plan for conducting surveys in 2021. This is the greatest need in order to provide for optimum yield from Alaska's fisheries consistent with the Magnuson-Stevens Act, and to increase the domestic production of seafood, a direct objective of President Trump's "Executive Order Promoting American Seafood Competitiveness and Economic Growth."

I'd like to also address the Committee today representing the shoreside processing sector and the Alaska seafood industry. Alaska's annual wild seafood harvest of 5 to 6 billion pounds supports nearly 60,000

jobs and generates nearly \$14 billion in U.S. economic output each year and supplies Americans with healthy sustainable protein. At the same time, our industry faces challenges on multiple fronts that are eroding our economic foundation. Since before COVID-19, our industry has been struggling in the face of tariffs that limit our access to the world's biggest seafood markets; loss of a critical meal tax deduction; uncertainty in securing a sufficient workforce for large volume fisheries; and habitat threats due to proposed development projects. Now, the pandemic is adding new costs and uncertainties, and exacerbating old ones.

Our industry's focus on health and safety protocols during the pandemic warrants additional attention. In March, DHS rightly recognized seafood processors as "essential critical infrastructure," as did the State of Alaska. As such, we have an obligation to continue to operate in order to help provide the nation with healthy, sustainable seafood. Given our essential role in the food supply chain, we must be able to operate safely. We have been fortunate to have a state Administration that engaged early in determining public health mandates and protocols for seafood processing operations and other critical infrastructure, to provide and continually adapt guidance to protect both our processing workforce and the rural coastal fishing communities in which we operate. At the same time, we need Congress to prioritize support for safe operations so we can continue our important role as food producers.

In the past several months, Alaska seafood processors have spent tens of millions of dollars implementing proactive health and safety protocols to ensure we are minimizing risks to Alaska communities, protecting our seasonal and resident workforce, and maintaining operations. These costs include implementing initial quarantines for up to 18,000 workers, which can include hotel, food, and daily medical screening; testing (often multiple times) for every worker; hiring medical professionals to provide daily screening and be on-site at plants; PPE; medical supplies; sanitation supplies; modifications

to ensure better social distancing on the processing line; security to maintain closed facilities and chartering aircraft to move workers safely. These are significant and unique costs due directly to COVID-19, but they are necessary in order to operate, and protect the food supply chain, the workforce, and Alaska communities.

Remember, the industry is taking on these costs out of pocket at the same time we are facing severe disruption in key markets and multiple pre-COVID cost burdens. While a fraction of these costs may be reimbursed, we face significant uncertainty because there's no specific Congressional directive to support health and safety protocol costs for critical seafood supply chains.

On behalf of Alaska's shoreside seafood processors, we want to recognize Congress for taking swift action to direct CARES Act money to fishermen and the seafood industry. As Congress considers a second relief act, we strongly urge you to clearly authorize funding and spending authority for such costs for the seafood industry, and to ensure that any such financial support extended to farmers and ranchers is also extended to fishermen. This should be seen as an investment that not only protects health and safety, but that also retains seafood processing jobs, enables us to take deliveries of seafood from thousands of independent fishermen, and provides access to healthy American product to seafood consumers.

Finally, as a member of the seafood industry, I must also highlight the role of USDA and how it can help provide financial support through commodity purchases and to address trade impacts. Section 32 purchases are a lifeline to the seafood industry in times like this, and we appreciate any Congressional support of this program. We also appreciate that President Trump directed USDA to consider assistance

for “other segments” of the seafood industry as it considers financial support for lobster; because we face the same impacts of the same retaliatory tariffs, we ask for the same consideration.

Thank you for your attention to the seafood industry and the complex and multiple impacts commercial fisheries are enduring across the U.S. during this pandemic. Addressing these challenges will allow us to continue to operate safely in a COVID-19 environment, adapt to long-term market changes and continued foreign trade issues, and keep the Alaska seafood supply flowing to protect America’s access to the resource.