



State of Washington
DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE

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**Testimony of Ron Warren, Director of Fish Policy
Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife**

**Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation
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Chairman Wicker, Ranking Member Cantwell, and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Ron Warren and I am the Director of Fish Policy at the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW).

On behalf of the state agency charged with preserving, protecting and perpetuating the state's fish, wildlife and ecosystems, while providing sustainable fish and wildlife recreational and commercial opportunities, I am here today to testify regarding current challenges with the fishery disaster process and how it can be improved — based on our experience with recent non-tribal fishery disaster declarations in Washington State. I appreciate this opportunity to come before you to highlight the importance of providing relief for fisheries disasters and discuss the challenges Washington is facing with the delayed distribution of funds.

Commercial, recreational and tribal fisheries are central components of the economy and culture of our coastal communities. The health of these fisheries is vital to our commercial and recreational fishing industry, which supports 67,000 jobs and contributes over \$300 million in revenue. The fishing and processing industry in Pacific County alone contributes over \$150,000,000 to the local economy. In another Washington county, Grays Harbor, the 2016 landing for Westport totaled 108 million pounds of crab, salmon, hake and other seafood. Moreover, fisheries' benefits are felt beyond just the industry itself — supporting shipbuilders, stores, hotels and restaurants in addition to many more.

Unfortunately, since 2008, natural disasters have devastated the state's commercial, recreational and tribal fisheries, causing significant economic hardship on our fishing industry and coastal communities. What's worse, these disasters appear to be occurring more frequently and with greater severity. Returns of coho salmon were well below expectations for most Washington watersheds in 2015, with the number of fish returning to major watersheds like the Columbia River and Grays Harbor being less than one-third of what was predicted before the fishing season.

In addition to the diminishing number of returning fish, the coho that did return were also significantly smaller in size than normal. The smaller size and lower numbers of coho were

likely the result of unusual environmental conditions that persisted off the Washington and British Columbia coasts for most of the year. The anomalous conditions included the marine heatwave commonly referred to as the "warm blob" in the Pacific, with surface water temperatures up to seven degrees warmer than normal, and likely caused food chain disruptions that led to the poor survival and growth of coho salmon. In response, ocean fishery seasons were reduced and coho catch prohibited in all troll and most recreational fisheries off Washington's coast in 2015 and again in 2016.

Fisheries in many inland marine and freshwater fisheries in Puget Sound, the Strait of Juan de Fuca and coastal Washington state were also closed during expected times of coho migration to protect returning coho. These fishery reductions and closures have had, and will continue to have, serious economic impacts on the commercial and recreational fishing industries in coastal Washington, the Strait of Juan de Fuca, and Puget Sound.

In 2016, the situation became so dire that Governor Inslee requested that then-Commerce Secretary Penny Pritzker declare two disasters for non-tribal fisheries — the ocean salmon troll fishery and Washington coastal salmon. In addition, individual tribes also submitted requests for their respective fisheries. Fortunately, in this particular case, Secretary Pritzker acted quickly and declared disasters within months. However, due to the federal furlough that began in 2018, approval of the grants and transfer of the funds did not occur until June 2019, and we are only now in the process of distributing funds to those affected by disasters from 2016. Since then, it has come to our attention that determinations for requests made by Washington tribes and our West Coast neighbors have either taken a prolonged period of time or are still outstanding. This is especially concerning since it has taken approximately three years to move from Secretary determination to funding distribution during a process that was essentially “fast-tracked.”

Given that NOAA scientists have noted another marine heatwave occurring off Washington's coasts since June of this year, which may be comparable to that observed in 2014, our fisheries could face another disastrous year in 2020. If that occurs, the local businesses within our fishing communities cannot wait another three years for any potential relief. These processes must be streamlined and improved — it's that simple.

Another issue that Washington experienced during the approval process was the exclusion of charter operations in NOAA's calculation of economic harm from the disaster. Charter fishing operations are commercial and derive their income from passengers who pay for the trips and services that they provide; as such, charter operations were equally affected by these salmon fishery disasters as other commercial sectors. But, as NOAA's policy is to treat them as “recreational,” charters were not included in the calculation of economic revenue loss. As a result, in distributing the disaster relief funds, Washington was faced with the decision of whether to include charter operations that clearly suffered from the disaster — knowing that this would reduce the amount of funding available to the other sectors that were included in NOAA's calculation. This federal “policy” decision was made unilaterally and the disaster funds fell far short of providing meaningful relief to those most affected by the disaster.

While we appreciate Senator Wicker's legislation (S. 2346) to improve the disaster declaration and funding distribution process, we have a few key concerns with the bill as currently written.

Our state believes any legislation to effectively improve this process must do the following:

- Ensure that funding for fisheries disasters is not directed away from other NOAA programs. These funds must not come at the expense of other critical priorities.
- Ensure that fisheries remain a priority in the distribution of funds. While we appreciate the importance of viable aquaculture operations, we are concerned that scarce federal funds to address fisheries disasters could be diverted if fisheries are not recognized as the leading priority.

Should any federal legislation advance, our state would appreciate the opportunity engage in meaningful consultation with the Committee and provide detailed feedback using our decades of experience. In the meantime, I would urge you to continue to provide timely relief for fisheries disasters, which are devastating to our fishing businesses and local economies. Additionally, Congress must find a way to quickly get those funds back into those communities, and should include charter operations in economic fishery disaster calculations.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today, and for your diligent efforts to address this urgent issue. I look forward to answering your questions.