

U.S. Senator Maria Cantwell
Senate Floor Speech ahead of confirmation of Gina Raimondo to be Secretary of
Commerce
March 2, 2021

CANTWELL: Thank you Mr. President. I come to the floor this morning to urge my colleagues to support President Biden's nominee to be Secretary of Commerce, Governor of Rhode Island, Gina Raimondo. Many people know that Governor Raimondo was the first woman to serve in that position of her state, and she has made tremendous impacts to that state at a time when it needed important leadership. So we're very excited that the president has nominated her for this position, and that she will put those same skill sets to work here in Washington.

The mission of the Department of Commerce, at least according to their website, is to foster, promote, and develop foreign and domestic commerce. Well, I can tell you, she's going to inherit a big challenge because obviously our domestic economy is still reeling from the impacts of COVID-19, and certainly needs to think about the continuing transition to a digital economy in an information age. And the foreign economy that she also will be charged with trying to help and impact as it relates to the United States is certainly plagued by the same pandemic and the impacts of that.

So we're looking for someone who can come in and help, with private sector experience, to really move the agenda of this administration forward. So, for me, Governor Raimondo's private sector experience really means a lot. She knows how to invest in new technologies and things that are going to help us grow jobs for the future, and she knows how to match up a workforce with those job opportunities that is also so critical as we move forward on many, many different policy issues that are going to usher in change.

As governor, she invested in workforce training and matching workers with relevant small business experience, called her Rhode Island Job Initiative. The program served over more than 1,700 employers and 11,000 people throughout the state. She was able to send her state's unemployment rates tumbling to a 30-year low, simply by doing a really focused job of matching workforce training to the needs of those industries that were growing in her state. So I certainly appreciate the fact that she has that private sector experience about knowing where to invest and bringing people together, and she certainly created successful programs on matching the workforce for tomorrow.

But make no mistake, the Department of Commerce is going to have a very challenging role as we try to deal with the impacts of COVID-19. One of the most important responsibilities, I believe, will be dealing with the sectors most hard hit by the COVID pandemic. I'm glad that Governor Raimondo is a governor of a coastal state, because one of the most impacted industries we've seen is the seafood industry, which was affected greatly by COVID-19 since early January 2020, when the lockdowns in China and around the world impacted the fishing seafood sector. U.S. seafood exports to China dropped by 31% in January of 2020, and 40% by February of 2020. Lobster, Dungeness crab, shellfish, and everything was experiencing severe declines, and West Coast fisheries have seen as much as a 40% drop in revenue. So sustainable fisheries are important economic drivers in coastal communities - I know that Governor Raimondo gets that.

She understands that commercial fishermen, and the impacts that they have, will impact not just seafood processors, shipbuilding, trade, but also our restaurant economy. And marine anglers took in more than 194 million fishing trips, which fueled our outdoor recreation and tourism economy. So I'm glad that Governor Raimondo, from a coastal state, is going to come to oversee the key functions at the Department of Commerce, particularly at NOAA, and harness the incredible data and information that helps us manage these economies. That keeps them safe and keep them focused on science.

I know that she understands that as Secretary she can use those good scientific agencies within the Department of Commerce to better understand the impacts of climate and the impacts of COVID and what we can do. We know, in the State of Washington, that just a little bit of science done at the University of Washington helped us immensely in saving our shellfish industry. Now we need to do more for fisheries across the United States. We need to invest in things that I call salmon infrastructure to keep, as we continue to grow our economy and continue to move forward on infrastructure, that we're also keeping ways to return salmon.

I think that this is one of the most important things that Governor Raimondo can do as Secretary of Commerce, restore the respect for the scientific process, the scientific community, and the important issues that are going to be at the heart of how our coastal economies are impacted by climate. I invited Governor Raimondo to take one of her first trips to the state of Washington to see exactly how our state has dealt with these fisheries issues. I know the presiding officer from California knows how important the seafood industry and the impacts to our coastal communities because of climate are as well. We need a leader in the Department of Commerce who will help us mitigate and adapt to those impacts.

I'm also counting on Governor Raimondo to help us with our export economy, everything from our ports, to farmers to aerospace, exports means jobs and about one in four jobs in the state of Washington are related to trade. So frankly, I think she's a departure from the last President and the last secretary, Wilbur Ross, I think he and the President spent a lot more time shaking their fists at the world community than engaging them on policies that were really going to help markets and help us move forward with getting our products in the door. 96% of the world's customers live outside of the United States and prior to the COVID pandemic, half of the world's population had reached the middle class. That means that's a big market, almost four billion people. U.S. exporters need to be able to reach those markets and to grow the U.S. economy and grow U.S. Jobs. We need to work with our allies like Europe and Japan to meet the real challenges we face from China. We need to expand U.S. exports and other fast growing markets around Asia and South America and around the world. And the Department of Commerce has a key role in promoting those exports, helping our company enter new markets and U.S. Commercial Service Officials are on the front lines of these issues around the globe.

So I know Governor Raimondo understands the importance of this export market, and she understands that the Department of Commerce can play a very big role in it, and I hope that she will get to work soon on working within the Biden administration to make this a big priority. And I also want to say that I know that she is going to on other science agencies within the Department of Commerce play a critical role, everything from the National Institute of Science and Technology, a small agency that doesn't get a lot of attention but it is very consensus based

on standards and fostering growth and a number of industries that are so important to communications and manufacturing and public safety. And so I hope that she will use, again, her private sector experience in knowing where to invest in new technologies to help us continue to grow economies like the space economy that we have in the state of Washington. We're very proud that we have as commercial space travel has started to be a major focus of the private sector have grown many businesses and many jobs in our state in that area and we want to see it continue to grow. But we need Governor Raimondo's leadership on the important policies that divide us on these issues. The U.S. EU Privacy Shield Agreement is such a negotiation. I know my colleague, Senator Wicker, who has been very involved in these discussions and negotiations, knows exactly how important digital trade is and commerce is leading up these talks to resolve these disputes. We must ensure the continued free flow of commercial data between the U.S. and Europe. A lot is at stake. U.S. and EU digital trade is worth more than \$300 billion annually and includes more than \$218 billion in U.S. exports to Europe. Every business that exports or imports or has a presence in investment in the United States or Europe will face difficulties if we don't resolve these issues and barriers to cross border data transfer.

So all of this is a very big risk, and we want Governor Raimondo to get to work on this very quickly and help resolve these issues. The free flow of data between the U.S. and Europe is critical to 5,000 tech companies in my state and more than \$2.8 billion of digital exports in our economy. So I'm pretty sure that this is the same as I said to the presiding officer, I know he gets how important digital trade is to the state of California and would like to see these issues addressed as well.

So, Mr. President, these are very big challenges for the Department of Commerce and the next Commerce Secretary to basically make sure that the impacts of COVID are dealt with in our economy, and to usher in a new era of an information age by making the right investments and depending on science to help our key coastal communities that have also been greatly impacted using and harnessing the aspects of NOAA, and really bringing in the leadership we need at the Department of Commerce to resolve our problems as a new digital age emerges here on an international basis and continue to allow our economy to grow. I know she's the right choice. I urge my colleagues to support her nomination. Mr. President, I thank the President and I yield the floor and suggest the absence of a quorum.