

U.S. Senator Maria Cantwell

**Opening Statement at the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation Hearing titled
“Building a Stronger and More Resilient Seafood Sector”**

**Witnesses: Ms. Leann Bosarge, Council Member, Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council
Ms. Cora Campbell, Council Member, North Pacific Fishery Management Council
Dr. Paul Doremus, Deputy Assistant Administrator of Operations, National Oceanic and Atmospheric
Administration
Mr. Phil Anderson, Chair, Pacific Fishery Management Council
July 29, 2020**

CANTWELL: Thank you Mr. Chairman and thanks for holding this important hearing. I’m reminded as I was listening to your comments of the late Commerce Secretary Ron Brown, maybe even testifying in this room, I can’t remember but he said “I’m the Secretary of Commerce and all the issues that Commerce oversees. But I guarantee you, if a member of Congress is calling me, it’s about fish.” And I think that that says the important nature to the state of Mississippi, the state of Washington, I’m sure to the state of Alaska, I saw the Senator from Alaska here, and to many of our other colleagues. These are important economic and sustainability questions, so thank you for holding this important hearing and particularly with the severe impact of COVID-19 on the seafood industry because it has had serious economic consequences, and I want to thank the witnesses for participating, especially Phil Anderson, who is taking a day off from running his charter boat out of Westport, Washington to be with us.

Phil, I’m sure you would rather be reeling in a coho, or spotting albatross or many other things but I really appreciate you being here and really appreciate you being here so early.

The seafood sector is the cornerstone of our 30 billion dollar maritime economy in our state of Washington. Fisheries and fishery related businesses, such as commercial fishing, seafood processing, shipbuilding, gear manufacturing, make up 60 percent of our state’s maritime economy, which as a whole supports over 146,000 jobs. In addition to commercial fisheries, the Tribal fisheries support subsistence and immeasurable cultural and ceremonial value and recreational fisheries too support our economy adding \$340 million to our state’s GDP. So yes, these are big economic issues for the state of Washington.

The COVID pandemic has resulted in hardship on these communities and industries and as of July of this year, I heard from Tribes, shellfish growers, fishing businesses, all who suffered from the severe impacts and declines in exports. The COVID pandemic unfolded in many devastating ways. To the restaurant industry. It gutted the market for fresh seafood virtually overnight, and the seafood and restaurant industries are inextricably linked to the nearly three quarters of all U.S. seafood that is consumed in restaurants.

The west coast fisheries have already seen a decrease of \$21 million in revenue, a 40 percent decline compared to the previous five-year average. In January alone, Washington’s Dungeness crab fishery saw a 37 percent decline in revenue from the previous year. Overall, it is estimated U.S. seafood sales have dropped 95 percent this year. So despite this staggering economic data, many fishermen have not been able to access the COVID relief funding from the paycheck protection program, the Main Street Lending Program, or even qualify for unemployment based on the nature of their businesses and tax structures.

USDA food purchase programs have not been able to provide the support for most seafood products, and some USDA programs, including the Farmers to Families Box Program, specifically block wild caught seafood from eligibility to the program, another blow to the industry.

So that is why I fought so hard to secure \$300 million dollars for the seafood sector in the form of grants and other assistance in the CARES Act to address the loophole. Unfortunately, the industry has yet to see a single dollar of relief due to a slow and inefficient and cumbersome implementation through NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service.

The Chairman and I, and I applaud the Chairman on this, have held several hearings and offered legislation to streamline the fishery disaster process, and our bill is currently pending before the Senate. While this bill was written before COVID, it is clear even now, Chairman, that this is an important aspect of what we need to be doing. In addition to direct financial impacts on the industry, COVID-19 has also affected the fisheries research and management system that we rely upon to maintain our status as a world leader in sustainable fisheries. NOAA has issued waivers for observers and monitors of commercial fisheries, and cancelled stock assessment surveys that supply crucial data. I'm going to talk about this later, but stock assessments are the bedrock for our fisheries management system. We need stock assessments to continue.

Today, I want to hear from our witnesses about how disruptions to stock assessments will impact fisheries management in the future.

In closing Mr. Chairman, I would be remiss if I did not mention my opposition and disappointment in the administration's actions in Bristol Bay, Alaska. Instead of focusing on getting recovery dollars out the door to protect the seafood sector, the administration is paving the way towards permitting the Pebble Mine. Salmon habitat and mining do not mix. This mine will kill salmon, and thousands of American jobs which depend on them if any accident were to occur. When the late Ted Stevens was quoted, he said this is the "wrong mine, in the wrong place." I doubt that he could imagine this becoming an even more pressing issue than it is today.

It is beyond unconscionable that the Administration continues to threaten the largest salmon fishery in the world instead of focusing on the catastrophic failure that we are seeing because of the pandemic. This is like a one, two gut punch to the industry. By failing to engage in this process in a formal manner, NOAA has abdicated its responsibility to salmon management. NOAA has turned its back on 14,000 jobs and a \$1.5 billion dollar sockeye salmon sector that is the largest in the world. So as I have said many times, we must let science lead, and the administration is not listening to science and NOAA is not sticking up for the science. This is an important public health issue, and it's important to protect these fisheries. I don't know what has happened with NOAA losing sight of this mission, but I guarantee you that the coastal communities that I represent, the fisherman that I represent, the jobs that they represent, the sockeye salmon industry are very disappointed and we deserve better.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

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**Q&A with witnesses at the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation Hearing titled
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CANTWELL: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I think the issue you and I are both trying to articulate is we want to see money out the door. I mean the money has been—

CHAIRMAN WICKER: --Absolutely.

CANTWELL: --appropriated but is it getting into the hands of fishermen and communities that need the help and support? Hopefully we'll get an answer on that. As it relates to stock assessments writ large-- look there's a huge opportunity as the world needs more protein demand for fish products to play a great role. I think it was Trident that came up with a fish pasta that's now on the marketplace. There's lots of—all sorts of innovations that are happening, and yet, guess what? If you don't have stock assessments, then you're not going to have the fisheries, and if you don't have the fisheries, you're not going to have the product. So, there is a way for us to move forward, but it all hinges on doing the right science analysis of the stock assessments. I hope that we will get this right and not wait until 2021.

Back to the Pebble Mine issue. I wanted to ask you, Mr. Doremus, about this issue as it relates to NOAA's, what I would call, lack of participation. Obviously the mine built would basically process 1.3 billion tons of ore out of a 608-acre open pit. Footprint is 8,000 acres with two huge dams that would potentially create acid generating mine waste. This is always a concern in an area with that much water. The water in the area would have to be treated perpetually just to get rid of the toxic materials. The mine would result in a permanent loss of over 3,000 acres of wetlands, 55 acres of lakes and ponds, 81 miles of stream, 11 acres of marine waterways. I think there's a picture there you can see, does that look like a place that we would be putting a mine?

So the destruction of this habitat, which is critical to the sockeye salmon for the Northwest, is beyond concerning. When I look at what U.S. Fish and Wildlife submitted in response to the Army Corps, it basically said, “Based on these identifying deficiencies, the draft EIS is inadequate and it precludes meaningful analysis.” EPA Region 10 office: “Mine—many have substantial and unacceptable adverse impacts on fisheries resources.”

So even the Marine Mammal Commission weighed in and basically said, “Concerned that construction and operation of Pebble project would have significant long-term impacts on wildlife and communities.” So, I'm trying to understand, because I certainly asked Director Jacobs about this, I asked him at his confirmation hearing, and he basically said, “Yes, NOAA would participate in the review process.”

So all I have found from NOAA is that you need more data to understand the Pebble Mine impacts. So, could you respond to what NOAA is doing to articulate the concerns about the impacts on fishery sockeye salmon in the Northwest?

DR. DOREMUS: Thank you, Senator. We certainly do understand your concerns. We have a consultation role through the Endangered Species Act that we're responsible for. This is not an area where I am personally deeply involved, and given the extent of your concerns, I think it'd be best for us to follow up with more detailed reviews of where we currently stand with this and what our engagement is. We'd be happy to answer your questions.

CANTWELL: So you're saying you're going to get me a response from NOAA?

DR. DOREMUS: Yes. I'd be happy to do that. It's not an area that I am personally deeply involved in and I'd rather consult with folks who are and provide better answers to the questions that you have today.

CANTWELL: Well I want you to hear that NOAA hasn't fulfilled its role, Mr. Jacobs hasn't fulfilled his role, and there's a lot at stake. Mr. Anderson, is there a lot at stake here?

MR. ANDERSON: Thank you very much for the question, Senator Cantwell. Well, it's a 1.4 billion dollar industry that supports thousands of jobs, many of which are in the Pacific Northwest, many of which are in Alaska. It supports, as you mentioned, the largest sockeye run in the world. The project, from some of the information I've read from the Army Corps of Engineers, suggests that more than 2,200 acres of wetlands and waters are going to be permanently destroyed, along with 105 miles of streams. So, from a fishery management perspective, and a harvesting perspective, and businesses that are dependent on renewable resources, this is a huge concern to those of us here in the Pacific Northwest.

CANTWELL: Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.