

Support: Congressional push for West Coast fishermen, seafood processors

February 23, 2023



Oregon U.S. Senators Jeff Merkley and Ron Wyden and other members of Congress have sent a bipartisan, bicameral letter to U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Secretary Thomas Vilsack, pushing the department to deliver critical federal support to West Coast fishermen and seafood processors.

“Commercial fishing and seafood processing on the West Coast are significant contributors to U.S. seafood production and also key parts of our country’s agricultural and food production system as a whole,” wrote the lawmakers. “Perhaps more importantly, the industries are the economic and community backbone of the small ports and vibrant rural towns that dot our Pacific shorelines.”

This industry has been largely left out of previous USDA commodity purchasing programs, and, for smaller coastal communities, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has been the primary driver of the devastating impacts the fishing and processing industry are experiencing, according to a release from Merkley's office.

As other sectors continue on the road to recovery, fishing and processing still face headwinds, and recovery is far from complete. Additionally, just as the nation was starting to emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic, the industry was hit with major impacts from the war in Ukraine, the release states.

“[N]ew challenges for demand of West Coast products arose over the last year,” the lawmakers continued. “In particular, West Coast seafood exports have also fallen, due in part to general economic uncertainty and, more recently, the war in Ukraine. Ukraine is a significant export market for West Coast harvesters and processors and has historically been the largest market for Pacific hake (whiting). NOAA’s Fisheries of the United States Data for 2021 shows that the U.S. exported nearly \$95 million worth of edible seafood products to Ukraine. Since the outbreak of war, these markets have been decimated.”

The lawmakers’ letter calls on USDA to include Pacific Northwest and West Coast seafood products that are currently produced in large volumes that are easily accessible and transportable in this year’s Section 32 purchases for immediate distribution to food assistance programs.

“In the last two years under your leadership, USDA has made significant Section 32 purchases of West Coast seafood products, providing a significant boost for the industry and our coastal communities,” they conclude. “USDA’s procurement programs are critical for ensuring that our food production systems remain robust, essential workers remain employed, supply chains keep operating, and America’s nutritional needs are met.”

Full text of the letter can be found [here](#):

Dear Secretary Vilsack,

Commercial fishing and seafood processing on the West Coast are significant contributors to U.S. seafood production and also key parts of our country’s agricultural and food production system as a whole. Perhaps more importantly, the industries are the economic and community backbone of the small ports and vibrant rural towns that dot our Pacific shorelines.

On average, commercial fishermen on the West Coast deliver more than \$500 million in ex-vessel value per annum, accounting for 14% 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.

As with rural economies everywhere, but perhaps most acutely in small coastal communities, COVID-19 had a devastating impact and a primary driver of that impact was the effect on the fishing and processing industry. According to a report issued by NOAA Fisheries in December 2021, ex-vessel revenue fell by 27% from 2019- 2020 and seafood dealers and processors sustained a decline in value added of \$598 million (or 13.47%) as well. The West Coast saw a larger decline in revenue from commercial fishing landings than all

regions as a whole, with a dip of 24% in 2020 as compared to a five year baseline (2015-2019). NOAA found that a significant part of the lost value was due to restaurant closures and reduced export.

In the last year, demand in restaurants has shown promise, but that industry still faces headwinds and recovery is far from complete. In addition to this continued draft on demand, new challenges for demand of West Coast products arose over the last year. In particular, West Coast seafood exports have also fallen, due in part to general economic uncertainty and, more recently, the war in Ukraine. Ukraine is a significant export market for West Coast harvesters and processors and has historically been the largest market for Pacific hake (whiting). NOAA's Fisheries of the United States Data for 2021 shows that the U.S. exported nearly \$95 million worth of edible seafood products to Ukraine. Since the outbreak of war, these markets have been decimated.

In the last two years under your leadership, USDA has made significant Section 32 purchases of West Coast seafood products, providing a significant boost for the industry and our coastal communities. USDA's procurement programs are critical for ensuring that our food production systems remain robust, essential workers remain employed, supply chains keep operating, and America's nutritional needs are met.

We thus request that USDA request 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.

Thank you very much for USDA's assistance in assisting our region's coastal economies.

Sincerely,

Senators Jeff Merkley, Ron Wyden, Senators Alex Padilla (D-CA), Patty Murray (D-WA), and Ron Wyden (D-OR), along with U.S. Representatives Suzanne Bonamici (D-OR-01), Val Hoyle (D-OR-04), Lori Chavez-DeRemer (R-OR-05), Andrea Salinas (D-OR-06), Jared Huffman (D-CA-02), Marie Gluesenkamp Perez (D-WA-03), and Derek Kilmer (D-WA-06).