

**Senator Maria Cantwell**

**Opening Statement at Commerce Committee, Science, & Transportation Hearing titled "Fishery Failures: Improving the Disaster Declaration and Relief Process"**

**Witness: Brigadier General (Retired) Joe Spraggins, Executive Director, Mississippi Department of Marine Resources;**  
**Ms. Rachel Baker, Deputy Commissioner, Alaska Department of Fish and Game;**  
**Mr. Chris Oliver, Assistant Administrator for the National Marine Fisheries Service, National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration;**  
**Mr. Robert Spottswood, Chairman, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission;**  
**Mr. Ron Warren, Director of Fish Policy, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife**

**September 25, 2019**

CANTWELL: Thank you Mr. Chairman, and I do agree. The right to fish and recreate is fundamental in the United States of America. And I'm sure that's why many of my colleagues from states who understand the needs of recreational fisherman as well as an important issue internationally. I want to thank Ron Warren from the Washington state Department of Fish and Wildlife for being here today, I look forward to your testimony.

In Washington, fisheries are a cornerstone of a maritime economy that its related businesses and seafood processors, ship builders, gear manufacturers, support 60% of our maritime economy, which is about 146,000 jobs and \$30 billion in economic activity.

Washington has experienced 17 fishery disasters since 1992, including crab, ground fish, and salmon. Unfortunately, the fisheries disaster process has become more burdensome, and has resulted in less funding and lengthy delays, putting an unnecessary burden on fishermen and fishing communities. In 2016, Washington suffered a large Coho salmon fishery disaster and this disaster impacted fisheries across the state, but particularly devastating in communities like Westport and Ilwaco, which is the fifth most dependent fishing community in the United States of America.

So the Coho disaster impacted tribes, commercial fisherman, charter and recreational fisherman, and impacted them all alike, but not all groups received adequate funding from NOAA. In a shift from previous policy, the administration determined that the charter fishermen should not be included in the economic determination. Thus, I believe Washington did not receive adequate funding for this disaster.

Charter fisherman, in my opinion, are just small business owners who navigate the waters and recreate and take our constituents out for wonderful activities. I am concerned that the charter fisherman have not been treated fairly, and that's why I plan to work with you, Mr. Chairman, on bipartisan measures that help ensure that small business charter fisherman are mandated into the Disaster Relief Recovery Act so they do receive adequate funding.

We also need to develop a plan for mitigation strategies to lessen the impacts of these disasters. Fisheries are, as you just said Mr. Chairman, whether it's shellfish in your state or other places, seeing an increase in severity and frequency due to warming waters and ocean acidification. And we see catastrophic ocean changes looming over our coastal communities, which very much are tied to their oceans as a livelihood.

So this morning, the UN report that is being published, or I guess being released, is about how climate change is impacting our oceans and having major impacts and major changes. So I'd like to enter this into the record if I could, Mr. Chairman, along with testimony from Butch Smith, the Ilwaco Charter Fisherman and their testimony this morning.

MR. WICKER: Without objection, but we're going to have to kill a lot of trees to add that to the record.

CANTWELL: Well, we can digitally add it, Mr. Chairman.

MR. WICKER: Without objection, it will be done.

CANTWELL: The most important part of this report though is that 95% of our world surface has gained in acidification and it is absorbing result is that 20-30% of the total industry carbon emissions are being absorbed from 1980 until now.

So what does this mean for us? Well, as you mentioned, the shellfish industry, which is critically important to Washington state – we have seen real-time changes in ocean acidification stop the shellfish industry from being able to grow. Only because the University of Washington and resources here helped them do new scientific analysis on when to do seeding, we were able to stave off the disaster from having long-term impacts.

But, we know that this is not going to go away. The warming conditions is making the challenges to our shellfish industry and to our fisheries writ large very, very real. And so we need not only this help to commercial charter fisherman today for disaster relief, but we need a real plan to mitigate fishing disasters for the future, so I look forward to working with our colleagues on that.

I also would be remiss if I just didn't mention the threat to Washington fisheries and fisheries worldwide from the Pebble Mine. With climate threats facing our fisheries, the administration is also rolling the dice on the second largest fishery in the world. The science is clear – the proposed pebble mine would destroy 94% of salmon spotting habitat, more than 3,500 acres of wetlands, and would require construction of significant infrastructure.

The mine is a direct threat to Bristol Bay salmon and thousands of jobs in the Pacific Northwest. So I hope the Army Corps of Engineers will not move forward on this process until science shows that they can move forward, which I don't believe putting a mine in the middle of an estuary is any strategy that threatens this big of our salmon for the Pacific Northwest.

I hope that NOAA will take into consideration our fisherman and listen to the fishermen. So far they have not listened to the fishermen off the Pacific Northwest and had a formal hearing. I hope that they will do so at a point in time. Ocean warming is not going to slow down and NOAA needs a plan to help save fishing jobs. This is something we should be working with on a bipartisan basis and I look forward to working with you, Mr. Chairman, on these important issues.