

WRITTEN TESTIMONY OF JAMIE O'CONNOR

Bristol Bay Salmon Harvester

Deputy Executive Director, Alaska Marine Conservation Council

Hearing before the House Natural Resources Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife, and Fisheries

Oversight Hearing on "Restoring American Seafood Competitiveness"

June 4, 2025 at 10:15 a.m. Longworth 1324

Chair Hageman, Ranking Member Hoyle, and Members of the Subcommittee,

Thank you for the invitation to speak with you today. My name is Jamie O'Connor, and I am, first and foremost, a fifth-generation salmon fisherman from Ekuk Beach in Bristol Bay, Alaska. I also serve as the Deputy Executive Director of the Alaska Marine Conservation Council, or AMCC—a fishermen-founded and fishermen-run organization that, for over 30 years, has worked to protect the integrity of Alaska's marine ecosystems and ensure that fish-dependent communities can prosper for generations to come.

AMCC is a founding member of the Fishing Communities Coalition, which represents more than 1,000 small-boat commercial fishermen from Alaska to Florida and Maine. Today, I speak on behalf of those fishermen—on behalf of the rural, coastal communities that rely on healthy oceans, fair access to fisheries, and a regulatory system that works with us rather than against us.

My primary message for Congress at this moment is that America's fisheries and the communities that depend on them need the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) to be fully staffed and funded. Amidst the exciting opportunity to refocus our efforts in support of domestic seafood producers, our future as fishermen has never felt so uncertain.

Introduction & Personal Background

My great-grandfather, and my first Captain, arrived in Alaska during the Great Depression. He used to say that during the peak of the Bristol Bay run, you could walk between the fishing sailboats on the backs of the sockeye. Standing on the shore of the Nushagak River, he felt awe, relief, and a deep sense of respect. "This is God's country," he thought. "This land will feed us."

And Alaska still feeds us. It produces more than 58% of the nation's seafood harvest and supports over \$6 billion in annual economic activity. Commercial fisheries generate \$183 billion nationwide and support 1.6 million jobs. This work—harvesting the healthiest, most sustainable protein in the world—is our American dream, passed down through generations. It is the backbone of coastal economies and family-owned businesses, sustaining schools, marine trades, and local commerce.

Commercial fishing is more than a job. It is a lineage, a culture, and a deeply held identity. Every season, we pass knowledge between generations. We learn how to read weather, fix gear, clean fish, and anticipate the tide. These traditions anchor entire communities. I've fished as paid crew every summer since I was twelve. That income helped me get through University and buy a small home. I'm proud to be part of this industry that feeds our nation and the world. Picking salmon out of a net with the smell of tundra on the wind is my heritage and my Alaskan dream.

Economic & Cultural Stakes

Yet today, that dream is at risk. According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) latest Alaska Fisheries Economic Snapshot, between 2022 and 2023, we lost \$1.8 billion in seafood revenue. Profitability dropped by half, and nearly 7,000 fishing-related jobs disappeared between 2021 and 2023.

NOAA's budget underpins virtually every aspect of the U.S. seafood supply chain. Funding reductions will have both immediate and long-term adverse effects on the economy and food supply, including disruptions to seafood data collection, a decline in fisheries science capacity, delays in disaster relief, compromised critical weather forecasting, weakened enforcement, and reduced support for seafood marketing and promotion.

The number one barrier to restoring America's seafood competitiveness is uncertainty. While instability has a profound impact on the entire seafood supply chain, from processors to boat builders, retailers, and restaurants, America's substantial numbers of small-boat fishermen are particularly vulnerable to unstable trade policies, rising living costs, and decreased demand. Fuel prices and supply costs are squeezing razor-thin margins. At the same time, we're facing increasing competition from countries that don't meet U.S. environmental or labor standards, like Russia, which continues to undercut U.S. seafood prices while using the proceeds to fund its war in Ukraine.

Independent seafood harvesters make up 97% of our nation's fishing vessels. These are small, often family-owned businesses. We work hard, not only on the water but at all the administrative and regulatory tasks required of any small business. Unlike many other sectors, fishermen wear multiple hats: we are business owners, laborers, food producers, and environmental stewards. We manage vessels, attend meetings advocating for regional and national regulations, navigate complex permitting systems, handle payroll and insurance, and operate in one of the most hazardous industries in America. We're not asking for a handout. We're asking for a fair shot. Strong, stable federal oversight is essential for profitable fishing businesses and healthy fish populations. Weather data and forecasting systems are essential for our safety and business operations. If this system collapses, we risk losing one of the last remaining wild protein industries on Earth.

In Alaska and across the country, we are losing our working waterfronts, critical infrastructure—processors, cold storage, harbors, fish buyers—are disappearing. When these pieces go, communities hollow out. A recent study in Southeast Alaska found that the loss of

infrastructure is directly correlated with the loss of fishery access: once permits and boats are gone, it's nearly impossible to revive commercial fishing. In roadless coastal Alaska, these fisheries are often the only economic engine available. The downstream effects are devastating: rising unemployment, outmigration, reduced access to traditional foods, and rapidly worsening health outcomes.

Working waterfronts are the physical and economic foundation of the U.S. seafood supply chain and broader coastal economies nationwide. These spaces support not just fishing operations but the boatyards, fuel docks, processing facilities, port infrastructure, and transportation hubs that keep seafood moving from ocean to table, and underpin the coastal economy. They are vital to tourism, marine services, mariculture, and other coastal sectors. Without sustained access to the water and the data systems that enable us to interact with it safely and effectively, no investment in boats, science, or technology will be sufficient. Working waterfronts must be treated as national strategic assets. I urge Congress to prioritize infrastructure projects that expand and protect working waterfront access through the Port Infrastructure Development Program, Economic Development Administration Public Works grants, and Community Development Block Grants (CDBGs).

We have seen what happens when fisheries are mismanaged or neglected. Communities die.

NOAA / NMFS Capacity Crisis

That's why I'm here today. We are at a crucial inflection point. Your choices will have long-ranging impacts. The federal systems that make our work possible—especially NOAA and the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS)—are under serious strain, and the cracks are widening. These agencies do far more than issue reports. They provide the data, tools, and staffing that enable safe, science-based, and economically viable fisheries management.

We rely on NOAA science not just for fishery management but for economic forecasting, subsistence planning, and climate adaptation. When NOAA is underfunded, it's not just data that's lost—it's capacity, credibility, and community resilience. It's economy, competitiveness, and food security. We are asking small, rural towns to survive rapid ecological and economic change without the tools to see it coming, and risking the significant benefits they provide to the nation.

In Alaska, our fishery management councils rely on NOAA science to establish harvest limits that ensure sustainable fishing practices. Observer programs and emerging electronic monitoring technologies protect accountability. Permitting, rulemaking, and stakeholder engagement keep the entire system moving. And all of that feeds a stable, long-term food economy.

But these core functions are faltering. Budget and staffing cuts are already delaying essential fishery surveys, stretching regulatory and enforcement staff, and stalling modernization of aging data systems. I hear directly from fishing families who are waiting too long for permit decisions, navigating outdated stock data, having essential loan programs delayed or revoked, and

witnessing the decline in capacity at NOAA offices. This is not red tape—it is our food supply, our economic health, and the stability of entire regions.

A strong, functioning NOAA and NMFS is not a luxury. It is a baseline requirement for a stable and competitive seafood industry. These agencies set the scientific and regulatory guardrails that allow the industry to operate sustainably, plan long-term investments, and access domestic and international markets with credibility. Without timely stock assessments, quota decisions, permit processing, and enforcement of standards, the seafood sector cannot function efficiently or fairly. Budget cuts and administrative delays at NOAA and NMFS not only slow down the government but also destabilize an entire food-producing industry.

Without strong, science-based fisheries management, harvest decisions must be overly cautious to avoid the risk of overexploitation. Fishermen understand that when science says a stock is declining, we need to fish less to protect fish populations. However, if we are doing so due to a lack of scientific understanding and an accompanying increase in uncertainty, it could also leave valuable resources in the water and unnecessarily hinder the economic potential of fishing communities. Robust fisheries science is essential not only to maximize sustainable harvests but to ensure the long-term health of both fish stocks and the communities that depend on them. Without continued investment in accurate stock assessments, ecosystem monitoring, and adaptive management, we risk jeopardizing the resilience of our fisheries and the livelihoods of future generations. Without sufficient scientific data, we risk overlooking a stock's decline or growth, leading to unsustainable harvest rates or missed opportunities that could deplete resources, undermine economies, and erode future fishing opportunities.

Strong fishery science also ensures we make the best decisions relating to overall resource development. Fish habitat must be meaningfully considered in federal permitting decisions, particularly those involving oil and gas development, timber sales, and large-scale water infrastructure. Healthy marine and freshwater habitats are the foundation of sustainable fisheries, and permitting processes must be aligned with long-term ecosystem and community resilience.

Regional Fishery Management Councils play a crucial role in balancing sustainable harvests, maintaining ecosystem health, and addressing community needs across the nation's diverse fisheries. These councils bring together fishermen, scientists, managers, and stakeholders to develop and recommend locally informed, adaptive management plans under the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA). However, their effectiveness depends heavily on sufficient funding to support scientific research, public engagement, enforcement coordination, and timely decision-making. We urge Congress to provide increased and stable funding for the Councils to ensure they have the resources necessary to deliver sound, science-based management that protects fish stocks, supports fishing communities, and sustains the economic vitality of the U.S. seafood industry.

Additionally, it is crucial to recognize that the cost of weather disasters for which we are unprepared far exceeds the cost of a fully funded NOAA and NMFS nationwide. Hurricanes, flooding, and other natural disasters experienced throughout the year across coastal America

cause billions in property damage, threaten American lives, and disrupt both the economy and culture. NOAA programs are critical to ensuring we have the information we need to evacuate, reinforce, and protect communities and critical infrastructure.

Executive Orders and Strategic Implementation

I appreciate the intent of recent Executive Orders aimed at restoring America's seafood competitiveness. Expanding federal procurement of U.S.-harvested seafood, investing in infrastructure, and streamlining regulatory barriers are all urgently needed. These steps are promising, and with robust implementation, they can deliver tangible benefits to small-boat operators and coastal communities.

Implementation matters. Without a fully resourced NOAA and NMFS, these investments will not reach the water. Small-boat operators are already worried about being sidelined by vague timelines and policy shifts that could favor consolidation. Streamlining should not mean removing the safeguards that protect small-scale access.

Many of our existing fisheries regulations stem from public process and compromise, with many serving as revisions of prior rules to ensure policies remain adaptive and responsive to evolving management needs. Fishing regulations are often complex because they aim to balance the competing needs of diverse stakeholders while ensuring the long-term sustainability of the resource through tailored management approaches. NMFS already has the authority to review and revise outdated rules. Many fishermen would welcome updates that move us into the 21st century. Deregulation done well is strategic, fair, and inclusive. With targeted investments and collaborative rulemaking, we can modernize our seafood sector while maintaining high standards and community protections.

Programs such as the Saltonstall-Kennedy Research and Development (SK) program already exist to support domestic seafood marketing and infrastructure. Unfortunately, this tariff-derived funding has been diverted by Congress to support NOAA's core functions, leaving very little leftover to pursue its intended goals. However, if congressional appropriations fully funded NOAA, SK's funds would be available to pursue the restoration of America's seafood through infrastructure, research, and marketing. Releasing these funds for their original purpose would jumpstart local economic development, job creation, and stronger domestic markets.

Congress should also reauthorize and fund the Young Fishermen's Development Act (YFDA), which was passed thanks to the hard work of several members of this committee, including the late Don Young, and signed into law by President Trump in 2020. To ensure the next generation has the tools, training, and support they need to enter and sustain careers in fishing. Without targeted investment in young harvesters, we risk losing not just jobs but a way of life.

Additional Federal Agency Support

We also rely on other federal agencies to ensure our industry remains safe and operational. The U.S. Coast Guard is our lifeline at sea. Consistent funding for air and surface assets is vital,

especially in Alaska, where a rescue can be hundreds of miles away. The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health administers commercial fishing safety programs, which are indispensable in one of the nation's most hazardous professions. Similarly, the National Weather Service must be supported to provide accurate forecasts and marine safety information.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) also plays a significant role. Seafood must be treated as a core pillar of the American food system. I urge Congress to fund the creation of a USDA Office of Seafood in the upcoming Farm Bill and to support full inclusion of seafood in federal nutrition and procurement programs. This will strengthen domestic demand, improve food security, and help stabilize our markets. These changes can unlock new economic opportunities, better integrate seafood into the national food strategy, and help address hunger with one of the healthiest proteins available.

Fishermen are often excluded from the same level of support, investment, and recognition that other food producers receive. Directing resources from the USDA Regional Agricultural Promotion Program (RAPP) and the Community Project Funding process toward modernization of seafood processing plants, cold storage capacity, fleet upgrades, and workforce development would deliver outsized returns. Reforming the NOAA Fisheries Disaster Assistance process by aligning it more closely with USDA emergency and crop insurance programs would also improve access and fairness.

The Seafood Tariff Relief Program (STRP), implemented during President Trump's first term, was an excellent example of the USDA's ability to swiftly and efficiently provide relief to fishermen negatively impacted by retaliatory tariffs imposed by foreign nations. We encourage Congress to view STRP as a valuable template to help independent harvesters weather current and future trade uncertainties.

Empowering fishermen as entrepreneurs means providing access to small business support programs, low-interest loans, intergenerational succession planning, and workforce training, particularly for rural and Tribal communities. This is how you restore our engine for seafood competitiveness. We need to be recognized in policies targeting small business resilience and rural economic development. By viewing fishermen as small business leaders and rural economic drivers, we can build more resilient coastal economies for future generations.

The Department of State, in coordination with NMFS, supports U.S. fisheries diplomacy, upholding our obligations in critical ongoing negotiations, such as the Pacific Salmon Treaty and Commission, the International Pacific Halibut Commission, the International Whaling Commission, and the North Pacific Anadromous Fish Commission, among others. The work of these bodies must be fully supported to vigorously defend the United States' interests and leadership in global fisheries.

MSA

As you consider reauthorization of the MSA, I urge you to prioritize:

- Strengthening equity and access for rural and Indigenous communities.
- Elevating bycatch accountability and habitat protection.
- Supporting Tribal representation on councils.
- Reinvesting in entry pathways for young and community-based harvesters.

The Act remains a strong framework, but we must modernize it to meet 21st-century challenges and ensure the next generation can participate.

Representative Huffman's bill, Sustaining America's Fisheries for the Future Act, is a step in the right direction toward envisioning a modernized system that addresses the changes and challenges our fisheries are facing. We at AMCC and FCC stand ready to collaborate on an enduring MSA reauthorization that maintains our nation's leadership in fisheries management and sustainability for decades to come.

Conclusion: Key Recommendations for Congress

To support a resilient U.S. seafood economy, vibrant coastal communities, and sustainable fisheries, I respectfully urge Congress to take the following actions:

House Natural Resources Committee Legislative Priorities

- Continue strong, bipartisan oversight of NOAA and NMFS.
Support science-based management, accountability, and inclusive stakeholder engagement.
- Pass legislation to protect and expand working waterfronts as strategic national assets.
Ensure continued access to the infrastructure needed for seafood production and coastal resilience.
- Promote cooperative fisheries research.
Support partnerships between fishermen, scientists, and managers to improve outcomes and trust in the process.
- Protect essential fish habitat in federal permitting.
Ensure fisheries values are considered in decisions on energy development, timber sales, and water use.
- Reauthorize the Young Fishermen's Development Act.
Equip the next generation with tools for business succession, training, and workforce development.
- Advance reauthorization of the Magnuson-Stevens Act (MSA) that:
 - Strengthens bycatch accountability
 - Enhances Tribal and community-based access
 - Protects fish habitat
 - Supports fairness and transparency in management

Cross-Committee & Interagency Coordination Needs

- Establish a dedicated Office of Seafood within USDA.
Coordinate with NOAA and elevate seafood within national food and trade policy.
- Support small-boat fishermen as entrepreneurs.
Expand access to USDA and SBA programs for loans, business planning, and workforce development.
- Recognize seafood as a core pillar of U.S. food security.
Include it in federal nutrition, procurement, and trade programs alongside other food producers.

Appropriations Recommendations

- Fully fund NOAA and NMFS in FY26.
Ensure timely stock assessments, regulatory processing, enforcement, and data modernization.
- Restore the purpose of the Saltonstall-Kennedy (S-K) program.
Direct funds to marketing, innovation, and support for small-boat fisheries.
- Invest in working waterfront infrastructure.
Leverage programs like the Port Infrastructure Development Program, EDA Public Works, and CDBGs.
- Reform and fund NOAA's Fisheries Disaster Assistance Program.
Investigate models like crop insurance to better respond to fisheries disasters.

Together, we can revitalize coastal economies, restore seafood competitiveness, and ensure the next generation of Americans continues to benefit from the ocean's abundance.

Strong science, transparent rulemaking, and fair access are not anti-business—they are the very conditions that allow this industry to thrive. I'm proud to be part of a profession that feeds this country. I believe in the promise of a seafood system that is just, resilient, and deeply American.

We are standing on the edge of a precipice. The decisions you make this year will determine whether coastal communities like mine continue to feed the country or become stories of what once was.

Thank you for your time and the opportunity to speak today. I look forward to your questions.

Sincerely,
Jamie O'Connor

Bristol Bay, Alaska Fisherman
Deputy Executive Director, Alaska Marine Conservation Council

Biography:

Jamie O'Connor is a fifth-generation Bristol Bay salmon harvester and the Deputy Executive Director of the Alaska Marine Conservation Council. Raised on the shores of Bristol Bay, she has worked in Alaska's commercial fisheries for over two decades, combining lived experience with leadership in fisheries policy, working waterfronts, and community resilience. Jamie is also the founder of Intertidal Consulting, where she works to connect fishermen, Tribes, and scientists with policymakers to advance sustainable seafood systems. She holds an MSc in Marine Systems and Policies from the University of Edinburgh and a B.A. in Journalism and Public Communication from the University of Alaska. She is deeply committed to ensuring that Alaska and our nation's working waterfronts remain vibrant for generations to come.