

Massachusetts fishing industry in line for \$28 million in federal aid

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Massachusetts will receive \$28 million in fisheries assistance under CARES Act allocations announced Thursday by the federal government, and efforts are ongoing to deliver more aid to an industry that officials say has been hit hard by impacts of the COVID-19 crisis.

Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross allocated \$300 million in nationwide assistance, saying the Trump administration “stands with the men and women working to provide healthy and safe seafood during this uniquely challenging time.”

The fisheries support 1.7 million jobs and generate \$200 billion in annual sales, he said. Only Alaska and Washington, which are each in line for \$50 million in aid, received larger allocations than Massachusetts. Maine received the fifth largest allocation, at \$20.3 million.

A senior NOAA Fisheries official said the funds will be disbursed “quickly and effectively.”

Spending plans will be developed by NOAA Fisheries working with interstate marine fishery commissions, and the plans must describe the main categories for funding, including direct payments, fishery-related infrastructure, and fishery-related education to address direct and indirect COVID-19 impacts.

Applicants may include commercial fishermen, charter businesses, aquaculture operations, processors, and other fishery-related businesses, according to NOAA Fisheries. “Once

a spend plan has been approved by NOAA, the agency anticipates that the three Commissions will review applications and process payments to eligible fishery participants on behalf of the states and territories. The states will have the option to process payments themselves.”

The commerce department noted that vessel repair businesses, restaurants and seafood retailers are not considered “fishery-related businesses.”

There’s a standard for applying for assistance and each state partner will be required to determine how to verify which applicants meet the threshold of economic revenue losses greater than 35 percent as compared to the prior five-year average, according to NOAA. The timing of funds disbursement will vary, the agency said, and will occur on a rolling basis and without the need for the secretary to first declare a disaster.

NOAA also announced Thursday that President Donald Trump signed an executive order to help grow the fishing industry.

USDA Seafood Purchasing

Earlier this week, members of the Massachusetts Congressional delegation applauded a U.S. Department of Agriculture decision to include Atlantic seafood in so-called Section 32 program food purchases made available in part by the \$2.2 trillion CARES Act approved in late March.

Massachusetts officials said the federal program has historically overlooked East Coast seafood, but has agreed to purchase \$20 million in Atlantic haddock, pollock, and redfish to help East Coast seafood producers.

Congressman William Keating said the purchases “will not only help to support our fishing industry during these trying times, but will also provide highly nutritious, sustainable food for families in need across the nation.” U.S. Rep. Seth

Moulton added, "Fishermen are hurting. Things were already tough because of the trade war and they got a lot tougher when restaurants closed because of the pandemic. Government's strength is measured by its ability to serve the people it represents. I hope this brings new business and peace of mind to America's fishermen."

Sens. Elizabeth Warren and Ed Markey and about two dozen of their colleagues are pressing for more fishing industry aid in the next potential COVID-19 relief law. In a letter on Wednesday to Senate leaders, the senators wrote that while many agricultural sectors "have seen a significant increase in grocery sales, seafood has been left out of that economic upside, as stores have cut back on offerings."

Citing reports that many of the nation's fisheries lost 95 percent of their sales, the senators said efforts to limit the spread of COVID-19 have led to a "near total shutdown" of restaurants and outlets that serve fresh seafood and the supply chain of fishermen and seafood processors has been "decimated."

The senators asked that the next relief bill include at least \$2 billion for the U.S. Department of Agriculture's seafood purchases and authorization for the purchased products to be distributed to local, state, and national non-profits on the frontlines of hunger relief efforts.

"The seafood industry is currently facing an unprecedented collapse in demand because of the novel coronavirus," the senators wrote in their letter. "We urge you to facilitate the government purchase of seafood products that would both ensure stability in this key sector and provide healthy, domestically produced food for Americans."