

Relief Misdirected

Small-scale fisheries are important for the food security of the United States. Yet relief measures during the COVID-19 pandemic favour industrial operators, and are unsustainable

When the global COVID-19 pandemic hit the US in March 2020, no one knew for certain what it would mean for the seafood industry, let alone small- to mid-scale fishing operations. With most restaurants, hotels and catering services forced to shut down or drastically curtail operations, and with the complete shutdown of schools and universities, the demand for seafood reduced by nearly 80 per cent. Alongside this, transportation restrictions to stem the tide of the virus broke the supply chains of fishing operations.

While large corporations and major seafood companies may be able to weather this storm financially, they proved not to be nimble enough to adjust to the changing times.

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Even though they were, and still are, struggling, small- to mid-scale fishing operations, however, proved best suited to shift business models quickly and begin direct sale to consumers. In fact, many had already been selling directly to consumers using the Community Supported Fishery (CSF) model and other direct marketing arrangements. With the pandemic, however, many had to ramp up their efforts in order to make up for the toll catalyzed by the loss of both the international and domestic restaurant markets. To be sure, the seafood industry, in general, is taking a major hit, but it is the small- to mid-scale fisheries, in particular, that were, and are, being impacted most severely.

At the same time, the need for food is as high as ever, with concern

over food insecurity growing every day. Unfortunately, because 90 per cent of US seafood is imported, with export rates around 60 per cent, the current US seafood system has long made it extremely difficult for local and regional fishermen to reach local consumers. Local and regional fishers and businesses have long discussed a desire for more direct-to-consumer markets, which is why the CSF model has been put to so much use. This is also why networks formed to support direct marketing are so important. Yet local and regional fishing operators explain that more is needed, and that infrastructural support from the state and federal governments is necessary to make direct-to-consumer markets work on a broader scale. As such, almost as quickly as the global pandemic began to escalate, so did the organizing power of those most affected in the food industry. Fishing communities and businesses quickly reached out to organizations like the Northwest Atlantic Marine Alliance (NAMA) to explain that they wanted to be a resource during these times, resolute in their desire to work, to serve, and to feed communities in need.

Coalition of groups

To rise to the occasion, like-minded people and groups formed a coalition of fishing, farming, anti-hunger advocates, and foodworker organizations in March. It had two objectives: One, to take advantage of the opportunity presented by the US Congress' desire to pass economic stimulus bills by expressing their need for support and their desire to help feed people. Two, to be recognized as the essential workers that they actually are. In a collective statement to the government, NAMA, the National Family Farm Coalition (NFFC), WhyHunger, Farm Aid, HEAL Food Alliance, and the Institute for Agriculture Trade and Policy (IATP) demanded that the government ensure

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The crew at the Sitka Salmon Shares plant in Sitka, Alaska fillets halibut during the spring season. Many fishers and seafood workers have questioned the federal administration's priorities when it comes to solving the country's economic and food security crisis.

equitable access to food for all as well as support the people, not corporations, behind the production, procurement, and distribution of food—from both land and sea.

Specifically, the statement recommended that the US Congress consider six key points in its forthcoming stimulus packages:

- Focus on farmers, ranchers, fishers and foodworkers of colour who are disproportionately impacted by the inequities of the US food system;
- Ensure a fair and safe livelihood;
- Bolster local and regional food systems that are poised to feed communities;
- Enact reforms that build resilience;
- Protect small- and mid-sized operations from corporate mergers and acquisitions; and
- Ensure every person in the US has dignified access to healthy and nutritious food.

Coming from fishing, farming, and foodworker communities, these recommendations were broad but pointed, making it clear to the US government that proper support of local and regional food systems was the appropriate solution to the ongoing economic and food crisis.

On 27 March, through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES), Congress responded with US\$300 mn allocated for the seafood industry. Congress directed the Secretary of Commerce—and, through him, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) – to distribute the financial assistance in the form of direct payments such as grants, as well as other forms of investments in the fishing industry and shellfish farms. Unsurprisingly, the federal government's response was insufficient as the stimulus package, while somewhat helpful financially, did not meet our coalition's recommendations. As such, the coalition grew, producing a letter addressed to the Secretary of Commerce, Secretary of the Treasury, Secretary of Agriculture, and Congress urging for increased federal support for fishing and farming communities in the US.

Taking an innovative approach due to social distancing measures, the coalition offered their recommendations virtually by way of a video message sent directly to the US Secretary of Commerce, Wilbur Ross. Signed by a diverse group of 238 organizations and individuals

representing 3 mn people from across the country, including 30,000 commercial fishers, the collective of fishermen, commercial fishing trade associations, seafood businesses, food and agriculture groups, environmental organizations, social justice advocates, and concerned citizens argued that as a renewable economic engine that generates 1.1 mn jobs, contributes over US\$100 bn per year to the country's gross domestic product (GDP), and also provides the nation's population with nutritious protein, the seafood industry must be given its due attention.

Specifically, the letter asked for:

- Prioritization of independent fish harvesters and thousands of small- and mid-sized seafood businesses, including processors, aggregators, distributors, and other shore-based facilities;
- An additional US\$1.5 bn in emergency funding, with at least 50 per cent allocated for small- and mid-sized fishing operations;

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- Debt forgiveness measures or deferral, and that access to the Payroll Protection Program (PPP) is prioritized for captains and crew who fish, particularly young fishermen (whether or not they own fishing permits) and that PPP benefits are extended, as needed, for businesses that can demonstrate an inability to pay their workers or contractors because of COVID-19 emergency measures;
- Support for young fishermen;
- Investments in shoreside infrastructure;
- Access to testing, protective equipment and medical care;
- Eligibility for the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA)'s Coronavirus Food Assistance Program to allow for the fishing industry to operate on a level playing field with the agricultural sector; and

- Strengthen the local supply chains by calling for grant programmes for young fishermen to obtain first-time fishing and shellfish permits and funding for a seafood marketing programme within NOAA that includes advertising resources and additional support for direct-to-consumer markets.

Consumer values

This urgent, multifaceted suite of recommendations would enable fishing communities to adapt to the crisis brought on by COVID-19 and the havoc it has wreaked on the seafood supply chain.

As they waited for the government to do its part, local and regional fishing operations were busy adapting to these new circumstances as best they could. In almost all instances, fishers were, and are, looking for ways to put fewer miles on their fish, attempting to sell as locally as they can and reach consumers directly. Before the pandemic, this often meant developing relationships and selling directly to local restaurants as well as starting CSF or Restaurant Supported Fishery (RSF) programmes to sell more directly to local and regional communities. Of course, with the restaurant shutdowns that came with COVID-19, small- to mid-scale fishing operations have had to quickly shift their approach.

With the pandemic, the CSF model has increased in use and many CSFs and direct-to-consumer models have been selling out fast. The CSFs have become their own supply chain, catching, cleaning, packing, and then selling the catch directly to consumers, which has included at-home delivery. CSFs harvest and distribute their catch in a way that mirrors the social, economic and environmental values of a growing number of consumers. Furthermore, while finding a CSF may have been difficult in the past, some are finding ways to ease the burden. The Local Catch Network (LCN) is a "community-of-practice made up of fishermen, organizers, researchers and consumers from across North America committed to providing local, healthful, low-impact and economically sustainable seafood" by way of CSFs and other direct marketing strategies. The Local Catch Network has been building strength since it was established in 2012 to serve as a resource for CSFs and other values-based seafood businesses.



Members of the fishermen-led Chatham Harvesters Cooperative transition to direct-marketing and off-the-boat sales amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, many had already been selling directly to consumers using the Community Supported Fishery (CSF) model.

This year, LCN expanded its easy-to-use seafood finder that aids in connecting consumers to local harvesters. In other instances, there are efforts being made to establish supply relationships with local institutions, such as schools or hospitals, which could continue after this pandemic if local and regional fisheries are provided the infrastructural support they need now to stay afloat. CSFs have been around for some time, but the pandemic is showing how these models run by local and regional fishers are essential for feeding people today and, at the same time, signalling the blueprint for a more sustainable future. To make this shift more permanent, however, requires “immediate expansion of community-driven shoreside infrastructure”, a demand laid out in the coalition’s request to the US Congress.

Instead of listening to the fishers’ recommendations, the White House issued an executive order effectively undercutting the solutions provided by the coalition. On 7 May, the Trump administration set into motion a plan to “increase America’s competitiveness in the seafood industry and protect our seafood supply chain” by deregulating fisheries management and advancing

industrial aquaculture by expediting its permit process and placing sole regulative control under NOAA. Not only does this place a greater emphasis on industrially farmed fish over local and regional operations, it removes the necessary checks and balances meant to ensure proper oversight.

The executive order heralds industrially farmed fish using the false narrative that factory fish farms are the way to feed the ever-growing need for more food. While the administration and aquaculture proponents claim themselves and their plan as the appropriate response, the community leaders and community-led organizations of the coalition have consistently pointed to the truth that lack of access has never been about a lack of food, and instead has always been a problem of distribution. To be sure, even before the pandemic, 37 mn people—including 11 mn children—struggled to find enough food, while four out of five US workers lived paycheck to paycheck.

Foodworkers themselves were twice as likely to be dependent on food stamps due to poverty-level wages. With the rhetoric of solidifying the country’s food security, protecting

seafood industry jobs, and the promise of creating new jobs domestically, it seems easy to rally behind the administration's effort. Yet this rhetoric simply obscures the crux of the federal government's proposed solution to our ongoing food and economic crisis.

NAMA has argued that the executive order fails to provide a substantive solution and is actually "a dangerous set of measures that would deregulate the fishing industry, expedite the development of offshore factory fish farming, and promote seafood exports." By issuing nationwide permits for ocean aquaculture within 90 days, the government plan stands to rush environmental impact reviews, public health concerns, and economic impact on coastal communities and sweep these pressing issues under the rug. As it stands, the administration's plan flies in the face of many environmentalists' and public health officials' evidence that holding animals in captivity in high concentrations dangerously undermines marine ecosystems and increases the likelihood of breeding diseases and viruses such as COVID-19. The floating cages used to cultivate finfish not only spread pollution through high concentrations of fish excrement being pumped into open waters but escaped farmed fish also affect the fitness and spawn rates of wild populations. Furthermore, acquiring the necessary fishmeal used to feed farmed fish would disrupt wild ecosystems by breaking links in the food chain.

The regulations that have been put into place to safeguard wild fish populations and marine ecosystems are being systematically dismantled, which is deeply troubling to both environmentalist groups as well as local and regional fishers. In fact, all the barriers being broken down are those meant to ensure proper safety, public health, environmental protection, and independent fishing industry support. In effect, rather than strengthen our domestic seafood system like it claims, the government's measures do quite the opposite, failing to protect fisheries and build the infrastructure that fishing communities need right now. On top of that, the measures promise to increase the US reliance on international markets over domestic ones.

Many fishers and seafood workers have questioned the administration's priorities when it comes to solving the country's economic and food security crisis. The order only highlights

this further with some, like NAMA, stating that the administration's plan begs the question: Who is actually benefiting? Without a doubt, the answer is globalized industrial fishing and aquaculture businesses pursuing profits, that would gladly be unconstrained by the public health and environmental measures for the protection of consumers and ecosystems.

In the fishing realm, deregulation is not new. For the past three decades, the catch share system has unravelled more robust fishing regulations in favour of corporate-friendly individual quota systems that have privatized the rights to fish and have given big companies the ability to buy control of fisheries to the detriment of ecosystems and independent fishermen who are best poised to adapt to changing markets and environments, while simultaneously putting seafood on everyone's table. Local and regional fishing operations know there is a better way, that industrial fish farms are not the answer because they only advance the corporate takeover and privatization of the world's oceans. The US government is attempting to further privatize the ocean under the cover of responding to the food and economic crisis of a global pandemic.

Sustainable solution

Instead, local and regional fishers say the White House should be pursuing a solution that equally sustains marine ecosystems, rural fishing communities, and the seafood system through:

- Community-based and ecosystem-based fisheries management;
- Diversified fleets and equitable access to fishing privileges;
- Limiting extractive industries such as mining and drilling that endanger both seafood supply and marine ecosystems;
- Transparent decision-making processes and accountable leadership; and
- Increasing access to regional and local seafood in all communities.

All these recommendations had been made in the spirit of a 'help us help you' mentality that speaks to local and regional seafood operations not only being given the capacity to aid the communities that need them right now, but also that they be provided the government-backed infrastructure



Community efforts like the Chatham Harvesters Cooperative have been building alternative seafood models for several years in order to provide more transparency and connection between the fish harvesters and their communities. These models have become increasingly vital.

that can feed the country well into the future.

For some, the methods being undertaken today would never have been considered prior to the pandemic, illustrating how the crisis has forced many to innovate in ways that may prove fruitful long after this crisis is over. For others, today's model simply expands on the practices already in place. But in all cases, local and regional fisheries are asking themselves: What will happen after COVID-19 is a thing of the past? Will the relationships cultivated before this crisis still exist? What will be the shape of the new supply chains? And, subsequently, how can the straight-to-consumer model become permanent? The feeling of "we just don't know for certain" remains, and fishers, harvesters, and seafood workers continue to work on the fly. But one thing is for sure: The US population is eating more seafood today and most of that is coming from CSFs and other direct sale operations. So a new way is already being cultivated. A commitment to tend to these new relationships is needed.

Currently, a primary way that local and regional fishers directly market their catch is through locally organized


fish markets. One such example is the Tuna Harbor Dockside Market in San Diego, California. It has grown to 10 fishing families that sell local fish every Saturday. Part of the issue, of course, for local and regional fishing operations is educating their communities about the diversity of seafood available. The US is largely dominated by tuna, salmon, tilapia, trout and shrimp—the last four coming primarily from industrial aquaculture facilities. But local and regional fishers such as those in San Diego are using the weekend market to educate the consumers in their community about the fish that are local to the area and rotate seasonally.

Sometimes this goes beyond simply selling local catch and includes local chapters of the global grassroots organization Slow Food (and its international campaign Slow Fish) bringing in chefs to show local consumers how to break down and prepare the catch for fresh and appetising consumption. There are also instances of CSFs, members of the Local Catch Network, and Slow Fish members going into classrooms to teach the importance of ocean conservation efforts and to cultivate a diverse diet in younger seafood eaters.

This is, in part, because moving forward, local and regional fishers across the US have explained that diversifying our plates when it comes to seafood must be part of the solution for our food crisis. Diversification not only improves diets but also sustains the oceans, and increases demand for local fish, thus stimulating our economy without having to import from, or export, for processing abroad. These examples illustrate that access to nutritious food can have a positive impact by not only changing processes of distribution but by diversifying consumer demand. While challenges abound, the pandemic is providing an opportunity for us to change

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Today, as the US economy reels and communities continue experiencing difficulties accessing healthy food, it seems that state and federal governments are poised to repeat the mistake should they fail to listen to not only the needs of their constituents, but their constituents' recommendations. However, government mismanagement notwithstanding, local and regional fishers, harvesters and seafood workers across the US continue to work diligently and have made it clear that they can be a solution to our growing food crisis should they finally receive the infrastructural support they need.


Yes, there is an urgent crisis at hand, one that promises to have negative repercussions long into the future should we not take the time and care necessary to listen now. Local and regional fishers have the solution; it is now up to us to make sure that their words are heeded, that their practices are supported, and that their communities are uplifted. 

consumption, in particular around creating a more sustainable diet that revolves around seasonal catch.

Local and regional fishers are always seeking ways to shorten the supply chain and they look forward to the time after COVID-19. The task ahead is to make sure that the direct-to-consumer lines established since the pandemic can be made permanent. Making this a reality requires continued political pressure beyond the pandemic. That is, it is not just about highlighting how fishers, harvesters, producers and seafood workers are essential workers right now, but impressing upon local, state and federal governments that they and the values they represent need to be accounted for in the long run.

Uplifting communities

In part, this means continued political pressure on Congress to rethink legislative approval of industrial aquaculture, which only fails local and regional fishing communities. While it has become evident that much of the difficulties wrought, especially in terms of food insecurity, could have been minimized had the words of community leaders, community-led organizations and activists been heeded long before the crisis hit, it should be well understood that the global pandemic has only exacerbated existing inequities and systemic issues in our seafood system.

For more 

<https://www.congress.gov/116/bills/hr748/BILLS-116hr748enr.pdf>
The "Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act" or the "CARES Act"

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/08920753.2020.1766937>

The COVID-19 Pandemic, Small-Scale Fisheries and Coastal Fishing Communities

<https://www.sustainablefish.org/COVID-19>

COVID-19: Sustainable Fisheries Partnership

<https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/national/noaa-fisheries-coronavirus-covid-19-update>

NOAA Fisheries Coronavirus (COVID-19)