

United States Senate

September 30, 2020

Dr. Neil Jacobs
Acting Administrator
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
1325 East-West Highway
Silver Spring, MD 20910

Dear Dr. Jacobs,

In May 2020, NOAA Fisheries started canceling research surveys to protect the health of its crews and personnel at sea on account of the COVID-19 pandemic, and we understand that the agency has yet to resume its usual operational tempo. Fishermen and communities across the country rely on these surveys as a basis for their livelihoods. We recognize that the pandemic has created unprecedented challenges and are grateful for NOAA's efforts to supplement the lost 2020 survey data through other methods. As we adapt to overcome the obstacles created by the pandemic, however, we fully expect NOAA Fisheries to successfully execute its research surveys in 2021.

Fishery and ecosystem research surveys are essential to support the U.S. blue economy and provide valuable fishery-independent data needed to carry out provisions of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA). Data collected from NOAA's research surveys are used to manage commercial and recreational fisheries that contributed 1.74 million jobs, over \$240 billion in sales, and \$111 billion in gross domestic product to the U.S. economy in 2017. The economic output of U.S. fisheries is maximized by setting accurate quotas and catch limits, which depend on the long-term, fishery-independent datasets collected by NOAA's research surveys. NOAA must collect these data to help fishermen, seafood processors, restaurants, and guides maximize their profits, maintain sustainable fisheries, and recover from the pandemic that has devastated the commercial and recreational fishing industries.

When NOAA was forced to cancel surveys due to the pandemic, NOAA acted swiftly to supplement the lost survey data by identifying and developing alternative data collection methods. We appreciate this response, but recognize that these methods are not sufficient replacements for the typical large-scale, long-term research surveys required to sustainably manage fisheries under the MSA. We urge NOAA Fisheries to take an immediate, proactive approach to ensure all research surveys are successfully completed in fiscal year 2021.

Any challenges created by the COVID-19 pandemic, whether logistical or health-related, that prevented surveys from occurring in 2020 should be identified and resolved through immediate planning and preparation. We encourage NOAA Fisheries to work with other federal

agencies and private industries that have successfully conducted research cruises and other operations at sea during the pandemic, including the U.S. Navy and Coast Guard; identify successful strategies for minimizing risks; and develop a proactive plan to protect the safety of scientists and crew while ensuring NOAA can complete its core survey mission in FY21. We request that you provide our offices with a clear, written plan for FY21 surveys before December 15, 2020, that details what and how resources will be used to safely complete the surveys. If NOAA requires additional resources to successfully execute research surveys in FY21, we urge you to notify Congress immediately.

Thank you for your continued efforts to support U.S. fisheries and protect NOAA personnel during the COVID-19 pandemic. We look forward to working with you to ensure that NOAA's normal scientific operations proceed without disruption in FY21.

Sincerely,



Lisa Murkowski
United States Senator



Doug Jones
United State Senator



Dan Sullivan
United States Senator



Edward J. Markey
United States Senator



Richard Burr
United States Senator



Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator



John Kennedy
United States Senator



Margaret Wood Hassan
United States Senator



Rick Scott
United States Senator



Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator



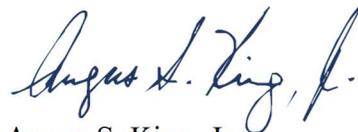
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