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September 15, 2020

The President
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Mr. President:

Thank you for your Administration's recent efforts to provide financial and regulatory relief to the Maine lobster industry. Such intervention has never been more necessary, as our hardworking lobstermen and women continue to confront the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, unfair trade barriers, and endless litigation on their supply chains and revenues.

The commitment secured from the European Union to eliminate tariffs on American lobster imports and the United States Department of Agriculture's newly announced Seafood Trade Relief Program and are critical steps to help protect Maine's lobster industry. Both actions will help to put our lobstermen on a more level playing field with their Canadian competitors.

Another matter, however, that remains unresolved for American seafood harvesters involves a long-running territorial dispute with Canada. Maine lobstermen and fishermen who work in the "Gray Zone" – an area located approximately ten miles off the Maine coast between the U.S. and Canada – are growing increasingly frustrated that their Canadian counterparts who fish in the same area are not required to follow the same regulations. This disparity undermines American protections, threatens the sustainability of the stocks, and causes dangerous interactions at sea. For example, generations of Maine lobstermen have marked the tails of egg-bearing females they catch with a v-notch and returned them to the water, allowing them to lay eggs, grow larger, and reproduce in future years. Maine lobstermen also abide by a maximum size limit, tossing back oversized lobsters in order to keep the stock strong. Because Canada does not impose such conservation measures on its fisheries, a v-notched or oversized lobster tossed back by a Maine lobsterman can be caught by a Canadian lobsterman merely yards away and brought to market.

I was encouraged when your Administration expressed a willingness to address this problem when I raised it at an April 2, 2019, Senate Commerce, Justice, and Science (CJS) Appropriations Subcommittee hearing. Under Secretary of Commerce for Oceans and Atmosphere Jacobs affirmed that NOAA would work with Maine and Canadian fisheries officials to explore the possibility of developing a fisheries agreement that provides for cooperative management of this area. Additionally, language I authored in the report to accompany the Further Consolidated Appropriations Act for fiscal year 2020 (P.L.116-94) encouraged NOAA to do this critical work. While I understand that the National Marine Fisheries Service Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office has corresponded with Canada's Department of Fisheries and Ocean Maritimes Region officials on this matter, further action is needed to rectify these glaring disparities on the water.

Maine lobstermen and fishermen have been waiting far too long for a resolution to the Gray Zone dispute, and the toll it is taking on their businesses, their safety, and the resources on which their livelihoods depend continues to mount. I look forward to working with your Administration to address the inequities presented by the Gray Zone in order to protect our seafood harvesters and invaluable natural resources. Thank you for your consideration of this important matter.

Sincerely,



Susan M. Collins
United States Senator

CC: Department of Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross