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Committee on Armed Services

Committee on Natural Resources

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Congress of the United States
2nd District of Maine

April 10, 2025

The Honorable Howard Lutnick
Secretary of Commerce
U.S. Department of Commerce
1401 Constitution Avenue NW
Washington, D.C. 20230

Dear Secretary Lutnick,

I am writing to request a meeting with you and my constituents representing the New England Fishermen's Stewardship Association to discuss how we can implement a fundamentally different approach to managing our nation's fisheries. As you may know, the United States has the largest Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in the world. However, we significantly underperform in extracting economic value from our ocean resources and providing highly nutritious protein to the American people. This phenomenon does not stem from a lack of potential, but rather from regulatory mismanagement informed by scientific uncertainty.

Throughout my time in the Maine State Legislature and Congress, I have consistently heard from seafood harvesters, processors, and those involved in the ocean economy that they cannot make the necessary investments to grow due to overregulation, arbitrary management decisions, and inconsistent policies emerging from various federal agencies, each optimizing for its own narrow mandate. The ocean and the economy are complex, dynamic systems, and our current data models used to inform regulatory decisions frequently do not align with the realities of the marine ecosystem or the drivers of business success and expansion. In short, resource mismanagement – characterized by poor data collection and engagement with fisheries stakeholders coupled with conflicting bureaucratic mandates – renders long-term investments in our nation's fishing industry too risky to foster growth, which could lead to the United States losing its fishing industry in a matter of decades.

In my home state of Maine and throughout New England, we are witnessing firsthand the consequences of our current approach to fisheries management. Since the early 1990s, the fisheries in our region have struggled despite decades of regulatory intervention. Even with significantly reduced fishing pressure and effort, many stocks – including groundfish, scallops, and herring – show limited rebuilding trends, while our fleets consistently fail to harvest anywhere near the total allowable catch levels. Last year, the New England groundfish industry significantly underperformed. Regulators informed the industry that it could sustainably catch nearly $400 million worth of product, yet it only landed a catch valued at only $35 million.

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Consequently, many coastal communities are losing out on billions of dollars in economic activity that never crossed the docks into our local economies, and millions of pounds of healthy, sustainable seafood that never reached American dinner tables. Even more concerning is that this is resulting in the closure of generational fishing businesses as older fishermen sell their fishing permits and young people leave in search of opportunities elsewhere, jeopardizing the future of our domestic food security.

The problem lies not in a lack of scientific rigor or intent, but in our failure to develop trusted management frameworks. Frustratingly, the current system does not integrate the knowledge and needs of those who know our ocean resources the most – the men and women who have sustainably harvested our fisheries for generations – with scientific understanding and economic realities. The system is currently dominated by government bureaucracies and ideological non-profit organizations, and it moves too slowly to respond to the rapidly changing ocean environment. The models guiding our decisions are overly simplistic, lack transparency, rely on outdated data, and rarely incorporate fishing industry insights.

That is why I am advocating for a holistic ocean modeling approach that integrates fragmented and isolated data streams from industry and various federal government branches that currently gather this information. Developing a private industry-led modeling approach for our nation's ocean economy is crucial. Positioning this modeling effort outside conventional bureaucratic constraints while ensuring appropriate government oversight can create a system that adapts at market speed rather than regulatory speed. This enables us to make evidence-based decisions, balancing environmental sustainability with economic competitiveness in a rapidly evolving global maritime landscape.

A public-private partnership provides three key advantages:

1. Ensures that industry stakeholders truly own the process, greatly increasing the likelihood of implementation and data sharing, which government-only approaches often find difficult to achieve.

2. Attracts top-tier talent from data science, environmental modeling, and financial analytics that might otherwise stay in the private sector, introducing rapid innovation to ocean economy modeling.

3. Establishes a framework that enables real-time market intelligence to integrate smoothly with environmental and resource data—something that fragmented government approaches have historically been unable to accomplish.

This approach would be implemented by an independent, industry-governed board closely collaborating with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) Collaborative Research Branch. The organization would be overseen by a board consisting of fishing industry representatives and experienced researchers, ensuring that outputs are scientifically robust and reflective of both commercial and environmental realities. This model would foster the necessary trust to evaluate new opportunities while revitalizing the ocean economy for the benefit of the United States.

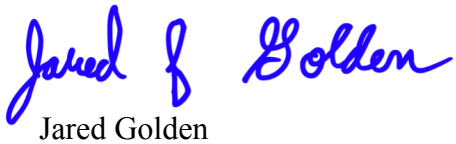
The proposed model outlines a clear path forward that enables us to transparently evaluate the regulatory impacts of management measures, the potential effects of offshore oil, gas, wind, and mining projects, and strategies for optimizing fisheries in the changing ocean environment. Additionally, it will improve the overall quality and trust in our fishery assessments, thereby reducing uncertainty and risk related to ocean economy investments.

This work could initially be implemented as a pilot project in New England with the goal of creating an integrated assessment framework that links reliable ocean data with industry knowledge and economics. This pilot project has the potential to generate $365 million annually from the region's fisheries, where stocks stagnate despite minimal pressure. If scaled, this would position America to match China's output and nourish our nation. The proposed project aims to deliver case studies across three critical fisheries, establish new collaborative frameworks that incorporate fishing industry expertise, and create decision-support tools to help ocean-related businesses and managers make informed decisions about our ocean economy.

Without intervention, projections indicate that many commercial fishing operations in New England will become economically unviable within the next 30 years. This would result in the collapse of a historic food production industry, the loss of thousands of jobs, the devastation of coastal communities that have shaped American maritime heritage for centuries, and an even greater reliance on foreign food. Conversely, by embracing this new paradigm, we can revitalize America's fishing industry, enhance national food security, reduce our seafood trade deficit, and restore economic prosperity to our coastal communities. We can demonstrate that sustainable management does not need to compromise economic viability – in fact, when implemented correctly, ecological health and economic prosperity go hand in hand.

I look forward to discussing this proposal with you in more detail and collaborating to secure the future of America's fisheries and the communities that depend on them.

Sincerely,



Jared Golden
Member of Congress