

Testimony to the International Trade Commission (ITC)

Good afternoon. My name is Jason Joyce, a board member of the New England Fishermen's Stewardship Association. I'm here today not only in that role, but as a lifelong Mainer—a son of a fishing family—someone who knows what it means when the ocean is the only thing keeping a community alive.

Because in many parts of Downeast Maine, fishing isn't just a job.
It's not even just a tradition.
It is the last thing standing.

In towns like Cutler and my hometown of Swan's Island, there's no big box store, no shopping center, no new industries coming in. And yet, families stay. Kids grow up there. Why?

Because of fishing.
Because of the hope that if you work hard, honor the resource, and follow the rules, you'll have a future on the water like generations before you.

And when I talk about places like Cutler and Swan's Island, I think about the kids growing up there.

The hope of kids in Downeast Maine who want to grow up and become fishermen one day — that simple, powerful dream — is what we lose when fairness disappears. Because that kid isn't dreaming about politics or trade policy. He's dreaming about carrying on a way of life that has shaped his family for generations.

That hope is what's at stake in the Gray Zone.

The Gray Zone is a 277-square-mile stretch between the United States and Canada near Machias Seal Island. At just 3.5 miles outside of Cutler Harbor, for decades, it has operated under two different sets of rules — American fishermen following some of the strictest conservation measures on earth, and Canadian vessels fishing the same waters under far looser restrictions.

Here's what that looks like on the water in the Gray Zone:

- American lobstermen v-notch egg-bearing females; Canadian vessels don't.

- We honor maximum size limits; Canada fishes oversized broodstock.
- We protect halibut and groundfish with stronger rules; Canada uses smaller size limits and different quotas.
- Our fishermen modify their gear at great cost to protect right whales; Canadian vessels fish without equivalent requirements.
- And in the Northern Gulf of Maine scallop fishery, U.S. operators get about 20 days a year while Canadian vessels fish shared waters for months.

This is not a level playing field.

This is not shared stewardship.

This is a trade imbalance layered on top of a conservation imbalance.

The result is simple:

Canadian-caught product harvested under weaker standards competes directly against American fishermen who sacrifice more and receive less.

Every oversized lobster taken across an invisible line erodes decades of conservation work. Every shipment of Canadian halibut or scallops entering U.S. markets at lower cost erodes the economic viability of Maine's fleets.

Every day this continues, Downeast communities — already hanging by a thread — lose a little more hope.

Remember:

Fishing is the one thing a kid in Cutler, Jonesport, Beals, or Swan's Island can still grow up dreaming of and actually do.

But dreams die when fairness dies.

USMCA gives us a framework to finally address this dispute. It ensures trading partners don't gain advantage through lower standards or loopholes.

At the very least, I urge the U.S. Trade Representative to pursue a binding co-management agreement with Canada that establishes:

- Uniform lobster size limits

- Mandatory v-notching
- Parallel gear and whale-protection standards
- Harmonized halibut and groundfish rules
- Shared scallop management
- Joint enforcement
- And a cross-border oversight council with fishermen at the table

This is not radical.

This is fair.

This is what true partnership looks like.

But if co-management fails — if Canada remains unwilling to adopt equivalent conservation standards — then the United States must be prepared to assert its own rules in the Gray Zone to protect our fishermen, communities, and resource.

American fishermen have sacrificed more than most people will ever understand. They've rebuilt stocks, innovated gear, protected habitat, and carried the weight of conservation on their backs.

But they cannot compete with an uneven border and an uneven rulebook.

This is not just about lobsters, halibut, or scallops.

This is about whether the next generation in Downeast Maine gets to stay.

Whether they still have a future on the water.

Whether the last hope of our coastal towns survives.

We are not asking for special treatment.

We are asking for fair rules, equal competition, and respect for the sacrifices

American fishermen

have made to protect this shared ocean.

The Gray Zone can no longer remain a gray area.

It's time for the United States to stand up for its fishermen, its communities, and its conservation legacy.

Thank you.