



STATE OF MARYLAND

OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR
Wes Moore

February 27, 2026

The Honorable Howard Lutnick
Secretary
U.S. Department of Commerce
Herbert Clark Hoover Building
1401 Constitution Avenue NW
Washington DC 20230

Dear Secretary Lutnick:

I am requesting an evaluation of an ongoing commercial oyster fishery disaster in the Maryland waters of the Chesapeake Bay as outlined in the provisions of Section 312(a) and 315 of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA), as amended, and Sections 308(b) and 308(d) of the Interjurisdictional Fisheries Act (IFA).

It is my hope that a full evaluation will clearly qualify Maryland for federal fishery disaster assistance. A federal disaster declaration will help address the loss of income to Maryland's commercial oyster fleet. The fishery has recently experienced a significantly depressed market due to a loss of fishing opportunity because of the prolonged presence of ice on the Chesapeake Bay. Now, the industry is also facing reduced consumer confidence resulting from misconceptions about the impact of the Potomac Interceptor sewage spill on Maryland's waterways. The compound effects have the potential to devastate our watermen's economy.

Public perception around eating shellfish since the January 19 Potomac Interceptor sewage spill is driven by three overlapping factors: misinformation in health risk messaging; misunderstanding about official harvest closures; and broader distrust. Advisories to avoid food from the impacted area do not apply to the areas where the shellfish are actually harvested. The Maryland Department of the Environment instituted a precautionary closure area both to conduct testing and ensure public health. And though recent water quality monitoring by the State continues to show no evidence that shellfish harvesting waters of the Potomac River are affected by the Potomac Interceptor sewage spill, non-government organizations are reporting bacteria levels higher than the information reported from government officials. We will continue to help build confidence and understanding that the origin of shellfish are traceable and all Maryland shellfish are not affected. But misunderstanding and inconsistency are still undermining consumer confidence and trust.

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In-person and online, the “unsafe” bell has been rung and the impact to Maryland seafood and aquaculture and associated buying behavior may be long lasting.

Local dealers and watermen have also expressed concern about the loss of market confidence, even in areas not directly under state closure. In fact, some dealers have notified our watermen that they will not purchase oysters harvested from the Potomac out of fear of contamination or lingering health risks.

We are seeing disturbing evidence in our commercial oyster landings. The January harvest data entered as of February 18, 2026 indicates a 44% reduction in harvest compared to the previous 5-year average (338,500 bushels) and we expect a further decline for the remaining season (Table 1.) In addition, the overall dockside value for a bushel of oysters (Table 2.) has decreased this season by 66% compared to the previous 5-year average (adjusted for inflation) (\$19.92).

Table 1

Commercial public fishery oyster harvest reported on Seafood Dealer Shellfish Buy Tickets as of February 18, 2026. Reported monthly harvest (bushels) based on when harvest occurred. The oyster season runs from October 1 to March 31.

Oyster Season	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	<i>Oct to Jan</i>	Feb	Mar
2020-2021	38,569	69,634	77,736	52,883	238,822	51,911	55,817
2021-2022	42,837	109,796	148,317	74,952	375,902	88,297	86,084
2022-2023	76,505	147,993	142,226	148,593	515,317	114,714	92,983
2023-2024	49,487	116,894	105,043	64,360	335,784	52,809	49,530
2024-2025	29,281	82,870	76,955	37,571	226,677	48,520	47,315
2025-2026*	26,261*	67,099*	63,010*	32,303*	188,673*		

* As of 2/18/2026. Preliminary data for the 2025-26 season is obtained from Seafood Dealer Shellfish Tax forms. Monthly reported harvested is determined using the date the tax was received, not when harvest occurred.

Table 2

Commercial public fishery oyster harvest reported on Seafood Dealer Shellfish Buy Tickets as of 2/18/2026. Estimated dockside values are calculated by multiplying the average bushel price by the amount reported harvested. Oyster season runs from October 1 to March 31.

Oyster Season	Reported Bushels Purchased from Maryland Licensed Oyster Harvesters by Maryland Seafood Dealers	Estimated Dockside Value (millions) (Actual Amounts, Not Adjusted for Inflation)	Estimated Dockside Value (millions) (Adjusted for Inflation to January 2026)
2019-2020	274,305	\$12.36	\$15.57
2020-2021	346,549	\$10.55	\$12.95
2021-2022	550,282	\$21.84	\$24.71
2022-2023	723,014	\$31.10	\$33.51
2023-2024	438,122	\$15.65	\$16.30
2024-2025	322,510	\$11.93	\$12.13
2025-2026	188,798*	\$6.69*	
* As of 2/18/2026. Preliminary data for the 2025-26 season is obtained from Seafood Dealer Shellfish Tax forms. Tax forms are still being received for the 2025-2026 season.			

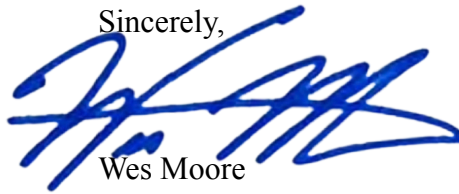
As the situation continues to evolve, it is increasingly clear that economic relief for our oyster industry is essential to bolster its resilience. Potential programs that could be implemented with disaster assistance include 1) financial assistance for the commercial industry, 2) communications support on shellfish safety and tracing, and 3) marketing support.

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While data availability is a limitation at this time, we expect to have all 2025-2026 oyster harvest season information available in May. This would be available for a full disaster evaluation at your request and convenience.

Thank you for your prompt attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Wes Moore', is written over the printed name.

Wes Moore
Governor
State of Maryland