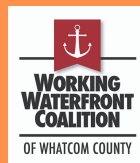


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THE ECONOMIC IMPACTS OF COVID-19 ON THE LUMMI NATION AND WHATCOM COUNTY FISHING INDUSTRY

PORT OF BELLINGHAM
REGIONAL ECONOMIC PARTNERSHIP
WHATCOM COUNTY, WA ADO

COMPLETED IN PARTNERSHIP WITH



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ABOUT THE REGIONAL ECONOMIC PARTNERSHIP

The Regional Economic Partnership (REP) at the Port of Bellingham is the associate development organization (ADO), a state Commerce designation, for Whatcom County. REP is funded by Washington State Department of Commerce, Whatcom County, the City of Bellingham, and the Port of Bellingham.

REP GOALS

The goal of REP is to retain and attract livable wage jobs and to assist businesses, entrepreneurs, and local organizations to thrive. We aim to work with our partners to create a resilient community and economy for all. We have expertise in financing, planning, research, real estate, and technology to help businesses start, develop, and grow throughout Whatcom County, Washington.

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COVID-19 impacts on the Lummi Nation and Whatcom County fishing industries

I. Survey Results Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted many industries throughout Whatcom County and the Lummi Nation. While data continues to unfold and the COVID-19 situation rapidly evolves, survey data gathered to date suggests a sustained downturn in many parts of Whatcom County’s local economy throughout the spring and summer 2020. Indeed, the Lummi Nation, Tribal fishers, and fishers throughout the Salish Sea and Alaska began to report economic impacts of COVID-19 starting as early January 2020 due to decreased demand from seafood markets, first in China, then throughout Asia, and globally by mid-March 2020.

The Port of Bellingham’s Regional Economic Partnership (REP) is actively working with local partners and other public agencies to provide direction toward economic resources and assistance to local businesses. The REP team has worked extensively throughout the COVID-19 incident with the Lummi Indian Business

Council, the Whatcom County Executive's Office, the Whatcom Council of Governments, the City of Bellingham, as well as the Small Cities Caucus (Blaine, Everson, Ferndale, Lynden, Nooksack, Sumas).

As part of our economic response and recovery, REP developed three surveys with feedback and guidance from partners at the Working Waterfront Coalition and with additional input from sector experts Paul Burrill and Port of Bellingham Commissioner Bobby Briscoe. The survey was designed to address the unique considerations and issues that commercial fishers, tenders, and processors may be facing as a result of COVID-19. We opted to separate the surveys into three because the nature of operations, workforce, and the position within the commercial fishing supply chains varies. Essentially commercial fishers go out and catch fish, tender vessels are then used to pick up the product from the fishers and deliver it to processors. There are therefore a lot of commercial fishers and only a handful of processors and tenders. The survey was open for responses from April 22 to May 20, 2020.

While the Lummi Nation Department of Natural Resources (LNR) opted not to distribute the survey among Lummi Tribal fishers, LNR recognized the importance of sharing the impacts of COVID 19 on Lummi Fisheries. As such REP initiated multiple discussions and conducted interviews with Lummi Tribal fishers in order to develop a holistic descriptive of the how COVID-19 has impacted and continues to impact Tribal fishers and their families.

Given the results of these three surveys and interviews with multiple Tribal fishers and Harvest Manager, Ben Starkhouse, the Regional Economic Partnership has found:

- 1) Businesses that have a seasonal component may be left out of some programs because they have to wait for a harvest/season to come and go before they are eligible to apply for assistance. This applies to not only the commercial fishing industry but also the agriculture industry.
- 2) Traditional tools for restoring the economy may be particularly inappropriate and unhelpful for the commercial fishing industry and Tribal Fisheries.
- 3) Relief programs that require proof of paid federal taxes exclude Tribal members and businesses from assistance that could save their businesses and livelihoods.
- 4) Relief programs that do not include 1099 contract workers, such as fishing crew, also exclude workers supporting the fishing industry, which is essential to food security.
- 5) Many fishers are having difficulty knowing what programs they are eligible for as well as difficulty submitting successful applications.

Washington State Governor Jay Inslee and Washington State Public Health Authorities have initiated a Phase I plan to re-open low-risk construction as well as some state and local outdoor recreation areas. On May 22, 2020 the Governor's Office determined that due to Whatcom County's failure to meet a key reopening criteria of less than 10 new cases per 100,000 residents in the prior two weeks, Whatcom County was not authorized to move into or apply to move into Phase II of re-opening. However, on June 2, 2020 Whatcom County Council voted to apply for Phase II re-opening as a result of modifications to the Safe Start plan and was approved on June 4, 2020. Therefore, the rate at which the economy is reopened, and to what industries, are important considerations as decision makers develop additional policy and relief tools.

Within this framework, the commercial fishing industry, Tribal fisheries and other fisheries in Washington State were deemed essential business as part of the Food and Agriculture sector (Washington State, "Essential Business" 2020). Essential business within the fishing industry that is specifically listed in the order includes shellfish and geoduck facilities (hatcheries, nurseries, and growing areas), seafood processors, and commercial fishing. The order also explicitly deems fishery labor and workers supporting the commercial fishing industry as essential workforce.

In total, 69 businesses responded to the commercial fishing surveys. Of those respondents, five responded to the commercial seafood processing survey, five responded to the commercial tender survey, and 59 responded to the commercial fishing survey.

The rest of this document proceeds as follows. Section II discusses the responses from commercial fish tenders. Section III reviews responses from commercial seafood processors. Section IV then discusses results from the commercial fishing businesses. Finally, Section V discusses the Lummi Nation Tribal fishing situation. Section VI reviews the survey limitations and Section VII concludes.

II. Commercial Fish Tender

a. Where and what do they tender?

The five fish tenders that responded to the survey have seven vessels between them and primarily tender fish in Alaska, though one tender responded that they also work in the Puget Sound and Columbia River. Within Alaska, four of the tenders work in Southeast and two in Bristol Bay, primarily collecting salmon harvests. Two tenders also noted that they tender Dungeness crab and herring. The tenders reported that the salmon are primarily harvested by seine or gillnet, with only one tender reporting that they tendered fish that were harvested by trolling.

b. Crew, seasonal workers, and unemployment

Like others in the fishing industry, all five tenders that responded to the survey stated they are reliant on seasonal workers. Four of the tenders use contracted crew members with 1099 tax forms and one tender uses W-2s and has a mixture of full time and part time workers. In total the five tenders employ approximately 28-30 seasonal workers, however, three of the five tenders reported that they already had to reduce crew and staff due to COVID-19, with a total of five lost jobs.

c. Expenses, plans to tender, and the need for assistance

Tenders reported annual expenses account from between 50-70% of their gross revenue. This includes regular payments such as boat payments, startup loans, personnel costs, and moorage. Other large costs reported included vessel insurance, annual maintenance costs, US Coast Guard annual maintenance fees, and other required services. Of course, this is on top of each tenders' personal household expenses such as a mortgage, car payments, utilities, and groceries.

Combined with high overhead and annual costs, two tenders reported that they were unsure if they would be able to tender at all this year, one reported that they would not be tendering at all, and two reported that they planned to tender. As for those that said they were unsure, there was a mix of general uncertainty as well as serious concern regarding the possibility of an outbreak in a rural area.

Three of five tenders applied for different types of business relief assistance, such as the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) and the Economic Injury Disaster Loan (EIDL). However, tenders also reported that their understanding was that the majority of programs that are currently available require that the losses already be incurred due to COVID-19 or requires that the tenders wait until after harvest season has happened. Tenders reported that they had considered applying for PPP, Small Business Assistance loans, unemployment, and moorage relief. None considered applying for rent relief.

III. Commercial Fish Processor

a. Where and what do they process?

Five processors responded to the survey and of those five, two process primarily in Whatcom County, the others process in Whatcom County, Alaska, and the West Coast. Within Alaska the processors primarily

process in the Southeast but also reported working in Bristol Bay and Kodiak. Four out of five processors process salmon, whereas only one processor works with tuna. Two of the processors also noted that they process crab and groundfish, as well as salmon roe and shrimp. Four out of five processors reported that they planned to process in the 2020 season with only one processor noting that they were unsure due to concerns about COVID-19 reaching small Alaskan Native villages.

b. Current estimates for orders and production

As the season slowly starts, the majority of the processors reported that they either had not noticed any changes due to the Canadian border closure, which was extended through June 21, 2020, or that it was too soon to feel the impacts. One processor did report that about 25% of their revenue was from Canada. More concerning, the processors have varying reliance upon international markets for sales ranging from zero to 65% of all sales, with an average of 30% of revenue coming from international sales. This is potentially problematic as international fish markets continue to be closed and prices for many species of seafood remains lower than average. Of the processors domestic sales, one processor reported that they only do domestic sales. The rest ranged from 20-60% reliance upon the domestic market.

The four processors that responded they would process in 2020, three estimate that they will have the same level of orders and processing as normal. One reported they believed it was too soon to know and another reported they estimated that they would process about 75% of their normal volume. Similarly, two processors reported that their orders for seafood have increased, two have decreased, and one had the same number of orders. For those with decreased orders, they reported it was due to food service orders declining and because the sales of salmon roe (ikura) and black cod to Asia, Europe, and the US have completely ceased. As of June 2020 the processors did not report any logistics problems, however as the season has not fully commenced this may simply be a reflection of survey timing.

c. Workers and unemployment

Unlike commercial tendering and fishing, processors rely much more upon full time and part time workers using a W-2 tax arrangement between the employer and employee. The five processors combined reported that they employ approximately 526 full-time employees, with one large processor accounting for approximately 400 of those workers. They also employ 192 part-time workers, and all but one processor employs seasonal workers. Only one processor reported difficulty in finding seasonal workers but said that they would prefer to manage this issue internally.

Thus far, none of the commercial processors have had to lay off staff. Three out of five reported that they did not anticipate future layoffs and two reported that they were unsure or did foresee future layoffs. Of the processors only one reported that they would be able to offer paid leave to laid off workers.

Four out of five processors expressed concern about worker housing and their ability to comply with social distancing requirements due to the nature of their operations, however, only one processor actually houses their workers on site.

d. Assistance needed

In terms of assistance needed, four processors reported that the most critical issue they had was identifying potential capital for future planning and identifying new customers and markets. One also noted identifying seasonal workers and addressing supply chain disruptions would also be helpful.

Three processors reported that they had not applied for any assistance or relief programs to date, whereas two noted that they had applied for Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) funds. All processors but one considered applying for benefits that they were eligible for.

The processors also noted two items of major concern. One processor said that if they do not get more fish to process within two months (e.g. by July 2020) that they would be forced to shut down. Others reported concern about the active fishermen and the risk they are facing by simply being on boats. This fear has been compounded by the recent outbreaks on multiple American Seafood vessels.

On May 28, the American Dynasty trawler docked at Bellingham Cold Storage and 86 crew members tested positive for COVID-19 (Shirley 2020a). Only the sickest crew member was taken off the boat for treatment at St. Joseph's Hospital. The trawler then returned to Port of Seattle. However, American Seafoods announced on June 3, 2020 that crew members of two more vessels, the American Triumph and Northern Jaeger were also being tested after 25 more crew members docked in Bellingham tested positive on June 4 (Shirley 2020b). In each case American Seafoods reported that all crew members were tested for coronavirus prior to boarding the ship.

IV. Commercial Fishing

a. Where, what, and when do they fish?

59 fishers responded to the commercial fishing survey. Of those fishers, 45 or 76.3% reported that they fish in Alaska. 37 reported that they fish in the Puget Sound (62.7%) and 18 reported they also fish on the West Coast of Washington, Oregon, and California (30.5%). For those fishing in Alaska, the most popular area is Bristol Bay (46.7%), followed by Southeast (40%), Prince William Sound (11.1%), and Western Alaska (6.7%). No fishers reported fishing in the Kodiak area.

Fishers reported that they primarily fished for salmon (90%), then crab (34%), halibut (10.2%), and cod (3.4%), with 20.3% noting that they also fished for other species.

The largest percentage of fishers responded that they were planning on leaving for the 2020 fishing season in early June (39.7%), with 19% stating they will leave mid-June, and 10.3% saying that would depart by late May. The next largest category of respondents was those that reported they did not know when they would be leaving (12%).

As for the 2020 fishing season, 50.8% of respondents reported they were unsure if they would be able to fish and 44.1% reported they planned to fish. Unfortunately, three fishers reported that they would not be able to fish in 2020. Those that reported they were unsure or unable to fish this season noted the following concerns and fears:

- Travel restrictions and border closures
- Demand and market may not rebound in time, specifically China and restaurant orders
- Personal and worker safety regarding congested boat yards, boats, ferries, and airplanes
- Processors may not be able to fill labor needs, limiting their capacity to process
- Childcare needs at home
- Difficulties finding capital for vessel and gear needs
- Remoteness of fishing villages and areas
- Potential conflicts between local populations and non-resident fishers

b. Workers and unemployment

73.2% of respondents reported that they rely upon contract workers with 1099 tax forms. 19.6% preferred not to answer the question and only a small number of the fishers reported that they had full time or part time workers using W-2 tax forms. In total, respondents reported that they employ approximately 188 seasonal workers, however, given COVID-19 they are expecting to not hire 64 of those workers.

c. Assistance needed

Annually, 49 commercial fishers reported that annual expenses eat up, on average, 42% of their gross revenue. Fishers reported anywhere from 5% to 100%. In order for their businesses to remain in good standing respondents said that they have to make regular payments on their boats (42%), loans for startup costs (54.4%), personnel (78.9%), and moorage (84.2%). Some also reported that they also needed to pay insurance, storage, bait, fuel, and other costs to stay in good credit.

42 respondents out of 59 said that they would like assistance for expenses. The forms of relief that they said would help included:

- Fair price adjustments on crab and salmon
- Grants or subsidies for moorage, web locker, insurance, gear, bait, and fuel
- Literally any monetary assistance that is not a loan (amounts suggested ranging from \$10K-\$100K)

Some respondents reported that they had already applied for financial assistance of some sort. Specifically, they noted that they had submitted applications for SBA loans, EIDL, PPP, and unemployment benefits. Many noted that they were still waiting, could not log into the website, or had determined that they were ineligible for the benefits. 44 respondents noted that they had not applied for assistance reported that they did consider applying for EIDL (56.8%), SBA loan (45.5%), unemployment (40.9%), and PPP (38.6%). Fewer respondents considered applying for rent relief (just two) or moorage relief (eight respondents).

V. Lummi Nation Tribal Fishing

The decision to open up fisheries and the Tribal fishing season lay ultimately with the Tribes as sovereign nations. According to Ben Starkhouse, Harvest Manager for the Lummi Fisheries, there are a number of factors that are influencing the decisions, which are being made on a fishery-by-fishery and Tribe-by-Tribe basis.

First and foremost, the primary concern is the health and safety of the Tribal fishers and the Lummi Nation. Given that there are approximately 600 registered Lummi Tribal fishers and more than 5200 enrolled Tribal members, nearly every family of the Lummi Nation is dependent upon fishing either directly or through extended family. If the Tribal fishers are exposed, this puts the entire Lummi community at risk. This is a very important point to consider as other Tribes in the United States are currently struggling with COVID-19 outbreaks due to lack of healthcare facilities and often fresh water access. At the end of May 2020, the Navajo Nation surpassed New York State for highest per capita coronavirus infection in the United States (Silverman et al. 2020). This triggered a rare mission by Doctors Without Borders within the domestic United States, primarily in New Mexico (MSF 2020).

The Lummi Nation is a local and international leader for COVID response. The Lummi Nation declared a public health emergency for COVID-19 on March 3, 2020, more than eight days prior to Washington State issuing an emergency proclamation limiting large events on March 11, 2020 and 20 days prior to the Stay Home Stay Healthy Order on March 23, 2020. The Lummi Nation School was closed on March 12, Lummi Nation Indian College in-person classes were suspended, all non-essential programs with the Office of Reservation Attorney, Probation Office and Courts were closed, and the Lummi Indian Business Council continued their closure of non-essential programs and services. The former Fitness Center was also converted into an additional temporary health clinic.

After health there are a number of factors influencing the decision to open fisheries or not. First, some types of fishing put fishers and crew at higher risk than other types. This is due to the size of the boats or the nature of the operations. Crews are often in close quarters with limited ability to comply with the social

distancing recommendations of keeping six feet apart. Due to the nature of specific fisheries, and given the cost of fishing vessels, it is not feasible for fishers to simply upgrade to something larger. One positive for some Tribal fishers is that their boats are often constituted by household members, which helps ensure the virus does not spread on the boat and then to households. However, this is not true for all Tribal fishing boats and so some remain at risk.

The Lummi Tribal fishers did have a successful geoduck dive fishery at the end of May 2020 with very strict guidelines provided by the Lummi Tribal Health Center. Divers had to be tested within three days of the fishery opening and the number of divers per boat was limited. While the opening was successful due to the precautionary and protective measures put in place, with each boat taking out fewer divers, the number of geoducks harvested by each boat was less than they normally would get. Fewer geoducks harvested coupled with the same cost of operations and the fact that prices from buyers have actually decreased due to lower demand from the international markets all translated into less revenue earned from one of the key fisheries Lummi Tribal members participate in.

Interviews with Tribal fishers also echoed concerns described by many commercial fishers above. For example, Tribal fishers reported that annual expenses such as boat repairs, bait, gear, and fuel may be influencing Tribal fishers to not fish because they are concerned about their ability to recuperate costs due to the decreased demand and closure of many seafood markets globally. This is particularly true for halibut in the Tribal fisheries, as the highest dock prices for halibut in Washington typically occur prior to Alaskan halibut hitting the local market. Due to price concerns, high startup costs, and questionable returns, the halibut fishery was not opened and will likely remain closed for the remainder of the season. This means that all 2020 halibut revenue has been lost.

Tribal fishers reported that for some species prices began to fall as early as December 2019 and January 2020, in line with the onset of coronavirus in Wuhan and subsequent closure of many of China's seafood markets. Starkhouse estimated that due to significantly lower than expected crab prices throughout winter 2020 the Tribal fisheries lost a minimum of \$400,000. It would therefore be immensely helpful if new local markets for seafood were expanded and strengthened.

Finally, Tribal fishers reported that the current moorage agreement between the Port of Bellingham and the Lummi Nation is very helpful and if the 2020 fishing season does not happen, it may be the only reason that they are able to keep their boats and their businesses. This is particularly important because fishing is not simply a profession or job for Lummi Tribal fishers – fishing is a way of life for the Lummi people and an integral part of Lummi culture.

VI. General Survey Notes

a. Survey distribution

The three fishing surveys on the economic impacts of COVID-19 were widely distributed across Whatcom County. The following public agencies were notified and asked to share with their communities via their websites, newsletters, and social media: City of Bellingham, City of Blaine, City of Everson, City of Ferndale, City of Lynden, City of Nooksack, City of Sumas, the Port of Bellingham, and Whatcom County. Whatcom Unified Command also posted the survey on its social media and COVID-19 website. It should be noted that the survey was shared with the Lummi Nation, however, the Department of Natural Resources opted to not distribute the survey directly to their Tribal fishers. Instead, we had a series of discussions and qualitative interviews to understand the Tribal fishery situation generally and for Tribal fishers specifically.

REP also distributed the survey via Team Whatcom partners, who kindly shared the survey via their email lists, including the Bellingham Regional Chamber of Commerce, Downtown Bellingham Partnership,

Sustainable Connections, TAGNW, Recreation Northwest, the Northwest Innovation Resource Center, Whatcom County Community College Technology Advisory Committee, the Lummi Indian Business Council, Working Waterfront Coalition of Whatcom County, and the WWU SBDC.

b. Survey and data limitations

The survey was developed with the goal of obtaining information from Whatcom County businesses in the commercial fishing sector regarding the impacts of the COVID-19 outbreak and subsequent Stay at Home orders. REP plans to use this data to inform economic recovery and resiliency strategies, as well as to apprise elected leaders and decision makers about the status of Whatcom County's economic and business situation.

It is important to note that this is not a scientific survey and while surveys do not have to be scientific in order to have valuable information, results should be interpreted within these limitations.

VII. Moving Forward: Economic Recovery and Resiliency

The COVID-19 outbreak and its economic impact are ongoing as of the end of June 2020, therefore the Regional Economic Partnership at the Port of Bellingham continues to coordinate and cooperate with Whatcom Unified Command, Whatcom County, the City of Bellingham, the six Small Cities, and many more service providers and partners. Moving forward, REP will continue to participate in, update, and contribute to multiple Unified Command Branches and Taskforces including but not limited to the Health and Human Services branch, the Food Security Taskforce, and the Cross Border Taskforce.

As of June 2020, the CARES Act allocated \$50 million to Washington's commercial fishing industry. According to NOAA (2020), the fisheries that are eligible for participation include the Tribes, commercial fishing businesses, charter/for-hire fishing businesses, qualified aquaculture operations, processors, and other fishery-related businesses. For the purposes of Sec. 12005 funding, they also note that "businesses farther down the supply chain—including vessel repair businesses, restaurants, or seafood retailers—are not considered "fishery-related businesses." The Federally Recognized Tribes on the West Coast were allotted \$5,097,501 and Federally Recognized Tribes in Alaska were allocated just \$1,000,000. The Lummi Nation and other Tribes throughout Washington believe that this level of funding is woefully inadequate. Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife will hold a series of meetings June 18, 19, 22, and 30 in order to take input on how the CARES Act funding should be distributed (see link in Works Cited) (WDFW 2020).

In Washington, NOAA will administer the CARES Act applications and dollars through the Pacific States Marine Fisheries Commission (PSMFC). As of PSMFC's (2020) most recent update on May 22, applications are not yet available.

REP has already starting researching and planning economic recovery and resiliency strategies to help stabilize and move our economy forward. REP will also continue to work with public, private, and nonprofit partners to create sustainable and creative tools to help businesses survive, to aid firms in re-entry when public health authorities deem the situation safe, and to curtail the impacts of COVID-19 on our local economy.

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