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CARDIN, MIKULSKI, O'MALLEY ANNOUNCE FIGHT TO PROVIDE RELIEF FOR MARYLAND WATERMEN

WASHINGTON – U.S. Senators **Benjamin L. Cardin** and **Barbara A. Mikulski** (both D-Md.) today joined **Maryland Governor Martin O'Malley** to announce that the State will seek a disaster declaration from the U.S. Department of Commerce for the Chesapeake Bay blue crab. A declaration will make Maryland's watermen eligible for emergency disaster funding to ease the economic burden placed on the crabbing industry as it faces a 34 percent reduction in the female crab harvest. The Senators and the Governor met this morning with **Captain Larry Simms**, President of the Maryland Watermen's Association, to discuss the new federal-state effort.

Governor O' Malley's request, which was sent to **Commerce Secretary Carlos M. Gutierrez** and is provided below, notes that preliminary economic impacts on watermen, harvesters and the processing industry are estimated at \$15 million over the next three years. Funds would be used to provide alternative economic opportunities for watermen and the processing industry, while state regulators work with the industry to rebuild stocks and restructure the fishery. Governor O'Malley, working with legislative leaders in the recently completed session of the General Assembly, set aside \$3 million in state capital funding to provide funds to employ watermen in restoring key Bay habitats, including rebuilding oyster reefs, grants to assist in the start up of aquaculture businesses, and grants to assist crab processing companies.

Senators Mikulski and Cardin, on the Senate Appropriations and Budget Committees respectively, will fight to put funding for the disaster assistance in the federal checkbook. If the Commerce Secretary approves the request, the industry will also become eligible for additional federal help through Economic Development Administration (EDA) grants, Small Business Administration (SBA) and Farm Credit System loans and Department of Labor worker training programs.

"Blue crabs are an essential part of the Chesapeake Bay ecosystem and watermen are an essential part of Chesapeake Bay culture and economy," said **Senator Cardin**. "We need to restore health to both of these critical parts of the Bay."

"Maryland's watermen are facing a very real disaster in the face of an already stressed economic market. It is time for us to team up to put the resources of the federal government behind the needs of our State," said **Senator Mikulski**. "As Chairwoman of the Commerce, Justice and Science (CJS) Appropriations Subcommittee that funds the Department of Commerce, I will not only urge the Secretary to declare a disaster, but immediately work to provide funding in the upcoming emergency supplemental spending bill to help our struggling industry."

"Our most valuable commercial fishery is in danger of an economic collapse. The blue crab supports one of the last major commercial fisheries in the Chesapeake Bay and provides the

economic foundation for many small Bayside communities,” said **Governor O'Malley**. “If we are to save Maryland’s blue crab population, we must act now. But we must also ensure that the livelihood of our State's watermen continues to be sustained. In order to help mitigate the economic hardships expected to affect our State’s watermen, we are respectfully requesting that the Federal Commerce Secretary declare a commercial fishery failure and fisheries resource disaster.”

Governor O'Malley has worked closely with **Virginia Governor Timothy Kaine** in taking steps to rebuild crab populations. Governor Kaine will be sending a letter today seeking similar relief for watermen in Virginia.

“Governor Kaine and I are committed to working together to restore both crab populations and the industries they support,” said **Governor O'Malley**. “And through this action will continue to work together and with our watermen and blue crab industries to help them move toward a stronger and more sustainable future.”

Governor O' Malley's letter to Secretary Gutierrez is below:

Dear Mr. Secretary:

I am writing to seek a declaration of a commercial fishery failure and a fisheries resource disaster affecting the Maryland commercial blue crab fishery. Emergency regulatory action is necessitated to retain and rejuvenate the spawning potential of the Chesapeake Bay blue crab stock by reducing fishing rates to protect a stock that has substantially depleted due to a variety of environmental factors. Chesapeake Bay blue crab stocks have declined by an estimated 70 percent since the early 1990's, imperiling the future of the Bay's most valuable commercial fishery. This request is made pursuant to Sections 312 and 315 of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (16 U.S.C §§ 1861a; 1864); and Section 308 of the Interjurisdictional Fisheries Act (16 U.S.C. § 4107).

Emergency regulation to protect and rebuild blue crab stocks will have severe impacts in parts of our state that depend heavily on economic activity derived from commercial fishing and related industries. In particular, management actions necessary to significantly constrain the harvest of mature female crabs will disproportionately affect lower eastern shore communities with a concentration of fishermen and processing plants. I would also like to point out that these management actions have been developed in close coordination with Virginia to ensure that we achieve Bay-wide restoration of blue crab stocks.

A declaration of a commercial fishery disaster would be the most efficient and expedient measure available to provide adequate and vital economic assistance to those communities; therefore, this request is necessary. Preliminary economic impacts on harvesters and the processing industry are estimated at \$15 million over the three year period necessary to rebuild stocks and restructure the fishery. This estimate is based upon losses viewed in light of recent catch and processing industry histories.

The dramatic decline in blue crab abundance in the Bay is attributable to many factors. Recent trends in harvest pressure have been brought about or exacerbated, in part, by many factors, including but not limited to poor water quality, loss of key habitat such as submerged aquatic vegetation and oyster reefs, increased predation loss, and changing climatic conditions that potentially limit the ability of young crabs to return to the Chesapeake Bay after developing in the waters of the near-shore Atlantic. Emergency action to restrict fishing rates is the only short

term option to protect and restore the fishery while broader habitat and water quality issues are pursued.

Please consider this initial urgent request while we continue to work with local representatives, experts, and stakeholders over the next few weeks to complete the documentation as to the nature and extent of the economic disaster affecting Maryland fishermen and related industries and take the necessary steps to mitigate economic loss and rebuild a sustainable fishery. We will submit documentation to substantiate this request for a disaster declaration based on the economic losses suffered by Maryland's fishing communities as a result of necessary emergency regulatory actions.

I respectfully request that you: (1) declare a commercial fishery failure and a fisheries resource disaster based on the evidence we compile from biological data, current and historical landings data and other sources, and (2) make disaster relief funds available to help the Maryland blue crab industry and local communities that depend upon these fisheries to survive this period of substantial loss.

We look forward to working with you and your staff to provide the documentation necessary to facilitate your evaluation. I appreciate in advance your willingness to consider this request and hope that by working together we can provide needed economic relief to our commercial fishing communities.

Very truly yours,
Martin O'Malley

cc: The Maryland Congressional Delegation

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