A Place at the Table

Expanding Seafood Communities' Role in America's Food Futures

Executive Summary



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Our oceans, lakes, rivers, and streams are of immense value. Together, they shape who we are, contribute to jobs and commerce, enable recreation and leisure, support healthy and functioning ecosystems, and forge — both literally and metaphorically — the contours of our communities. Our shared waters are also a critical source of food.

Although seafood is a relatively small portion of overall food production in the United States, territories, and Tribal nations, its societal contributions are arguably supersized. Seafood is an important source of high-quality protein, rich in omega-3 fatty acids and micronutrients vital to human health.

The importance of seafood to our collective economic, sociocultural, and human health and well-being stands in stark contrast to how seafood has (and has not) been considered as a component of our nation's food systems, which encompass the people, places, infrastructure, institutions, policies, and ecological resources that contribute to producing, harvesting, processing, distributing, accessing, consuming, and disposing food.

As we scan the horizon and imagine a future where seafood communities have a place at the table in food system policy, we collectively ask: what would it take to build and sustain vibrant local and regional seafood systems? The purpose of this report is to take stock of the diverse challenges impacting seafood communities, summarize key pathways for change, and outline strategic interventions that could be advanced to strengthen local and regional seafood systems.

SETTING THE TABLE

This report brings together insights gathered over the last two and a half years through a collaborative process that ultimately involved more than one hundred people. The report – organized as an action plan – summarizes barriers that create roadblocks, as well as pathways for change and strategic interventions to strengthen local and regional seafood systems in the United States.

Recognizing the economic, social, cultural, and dietary importance of seafood to our nation, this report provides input on detrimental barriers, pathways for change, and strategic interventions for strengthening our nation's local and regional seafood systems. This report is a synthesis of information generated from four interrelated activities from 2024 to 2026:

(1) Thirteen community-based case studies across the United States and territories;

(2) Seven focus groups with those involved in seafood harvesting, processing, marketing, advocacy, and extension;

(3) A systematic review of the literature on access issues in seafood systems in the U.S; and

(4) An in-person workshop designed to identify integrated pathways for strengthening local and regional seafood systems.

Just as the findings from this action plan are the result of a collaborative process, so too is the vision for how individuals, businesses, organizations, and government agencies can use, adapt, and respond to the ideas outlined in it. Specifically, we view this plan as a tool to bring people together to address concrete challenges with a shared purpose. In taking this perspective, we adopt the viewpoint that these problems transcend geographic boundaries, political ideologies, and economic sectors; the opportunity to bring about change belongs to everyone — including you.

BARRIERS

Those who harvest, grow, process, and distribute seafood in the United States — for local, regional, and national consumption — face a multitude of challenges on and off the water.

1. Coastal and shoreside access deficit
2. Regulatory burden and mismatch
3. Technical assistance gap
4. Cost of doing business
5. Systemic discrimination
6. Loss of community cohesion
7. Competition with imports
8. Consumer knowledge and access
9. Shocks, disruptions, and disasters
10. Deceptive marketing practices
11. Degraded habitats and ecosystems



PATHWAYS & STRATEGIC INTERVENTIONS FOR CHANGE



Pathway 1. Integrate seafood into food system and nutrition policies, technical assistance, and funding

Strategic Interventions

Establish and sustain liaison positions within relevant federal agencies to represent and consult on behalf of seafood-dependent communities.

Review and update U.S. Department of Agriculture grant programs to ensure inclusivity and salience to the seafood sector.

Establish an interagency subcommittee on seafood to strengthen the connection between NOAA Fisheries and the U.S. Department of Agriculture beyond aquaculture.

Establish a Seafood Title in the next Farm Bill.

Conduct a systematic review of existing regulatory and funding ecosystems to identify gaps where seafood should be recognized.

Review and update National Standards in the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act and their associated guidelines to ensure they are reflective of fish as food.

Harmonize policy and regulatory disconnects across different regulating agencies.

Establish, enhance, or expand workforce development programs and fellowships with a focus on seafood system resilience and supply chain dynamics.

Establish an index that measures the performance of U.S. fisheries from the perspective of contributions to the domestic food system.

Pathway 2. Foster and enhance learning networks

Strategic Interventions

Build or expand programs that support the needs of seafood-dependent communities (e.g., business acumen/financial skills, youth training, mentorship, etc.).
Create university-based research programs focused on the intersection of seafood and food systems.
Strengthen seafood advocacy organization(s) with regional structure and national impact that are focused on local and regional seafood system policies.
Establish seafood-focused innovation centers to work with and support seafood-dependent communities.
Expand peer-to-peer mentorship programs.
Create new or enhance existing online communities.

Pathway 3. Invest in intentionally designed infrastructure

Strategic Interventions

Build scale-appropriate and shared facilities (e.g., commercial kitchens, freezer facilities, retail, etc.).
Create affordable housing options (seasonal, rentals, ownership) for people working in the seafood industry.
Establish cooperative facilities for processing and product development that include kitchens that allow for value added innovation on consumer-ready products.
Established shared-use facilities for cold storage.
Establish shared-use distribution facilities.
Establish trust(s) for publicly held working waterfront docks that support the seafood sector in perpetuity.
Remove prohibitions on capital, grant, and disaster funding access for working waterfront facilities.
Commission business case analysis for non-commodity seafood, and develop the economic argument for supporting this side of the seafood industry.



Pathway 4. Increase consumer education, nutritional access, and confidence

Strategic Interventions

Develop tools to enhance transparency and traceability that are accessible and accurate for producers and consumers.

Establish a regionally coordinated marketing initiative or body that supports local and regional seafood through diverse media engagement and educational content.

Establish seafood testing networks to monitor and discourage seafood mislabeling and fraud.

Establish quota set-aside programs for local and regional seafood distribution.

Establish mandatory seafood labeling rules that include country of origin.

Establish a coordinated network of state and local government seafood and promotional boards to market local “product” and the value of the seafood “industry.”

Additional strategies for increasing access to public and private capital

Strategic Interventions

Establish state food security infrastructure programs including an infrastructure reimbursement fund for outboard motors, refrigerated trucks, processing, etc.

Create a disaster savings account relief program and/or similar risk management initiatives.

Invest in affordable and/or middle-income housing options in coastal communities.

The full report is available at the Local Catch Network Resource Library https://localcatch.org/resources/.






Pendleton Pt
Mouse I
Bn
stk
rky
hrd
VARN 8° 45' W IN 1934
ANNUAL INCREASE 7'