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September 25, 2026

The Honorable Brooke L. Rollins
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Rollins,

We write regarding the significant losses suffered by commercial oyster growers in Coastal Virginia in connection with recent harmful algal bloom and low dissolved oxygen conditions affecting portions of the Chesapeake Bay and surrounding waters. We respectfully request that the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Farm Service Agency (FSA) promptly evaluate these losses and determine whether affected localities satisfy the applicable criteria for a Secretarial natural disaster designation.

Coastal Virginia supports a significant commercial aquaculture and seafood industry that provides jobs, supports working waterfronts, and supplies oysters and other seafood products to markets throughout Virginia and across the country. Commercial oyster growers have reported substantial oyster mortality coinciding with the recent harmful algal bloom and low dissolved oxygen conditions, threatening lasting consequences for growers and the broader seafood economy.

Commercial oyster operations in portions of Coastal Virginia have reported significant mortality, including the loss of market-sized oysters, oysters currently in grow-out, and seed oysters during the recent harmful algal bloom and associated low dissolved oxygen conditions. These losses extend well beyond oysters that would have been harvested this year. The loss of seed and oysters in various stages of production threatens future harvests and revenue for multiple growing seasons and could substantially disrupt the ability of local oyster operations to recover in the near to mid-term.

The effects of these losses also extend beyond a single producer. Coastal Virginia's seafood economy depends on an interconnected network of oyster growers, hatcheries, wholesalers, processors, distributors, restaurants, and other businesses. A loss of this magnitude could reduce future oyster supplies and create downstream impacts throughout the region's seafood economy.

Aquaculture producers face unique challenges following a natural disaster because much of their inventory remains in the water for extended periods before reaching market size. When an event causes mortality across market-ready oysters, grow-out inventory, and seed simultaneously, producers can lose both current inventory and the stock necessary to sustain production in subsequent years. The economic consequences can therefore continue long after water conditions improve.

Given the severity of these reported losses, we respectfully request that the USDA direct the FSA to immediately initiate the necessary assessment and documentation of oyster production losses in affected Coastal Virginia localities and determine whether any affected counties satisfy the requirements for a Secretarial natural disaster designation. Specifically, we ask the FSA to work with affected producers and appropriate State and scientific partners to determine the extent and cause of the reported mortality, whether the losses resulted from an eligible natural disaster, and whether documented production losses are sufficient to support such a designation. We further ask the FSA to consider all applicable authorities available to the Secretary, including 7 C.F.R. § 759.5(d), in light of the severity of the reported losses and resulting hardship to Virginia aquaculture producers.

We further request that FSA promptly determine the availability of assistance to affected oyster growers through Emergency Farm Loans, the Noninsured Crop Disaster Assistance Program (NAP), the Emergency Assistance for Livestock, Honey Bees, and Farm-Raised Fish Program (ELAP), and any other applicable USDA disaster authorities. We also ask USDA to determine whether the reported oyster mortality and the conditions that caused or contributed to these losses constitute an eligible loss condition under applicable FSA programs and provide affected producers with the technical assistance necessary to document their losses and access any assistance for which they are eligible.

As the extent of the reported oyster mortality becomes clearer, we ask the USDA to coordinate with appropriate federal and state agencies, Virginia Institute of Marine Sciences (VIMS), Virginia Tech, and other relevant scientific partners to verify the scope and cause of these losses and determine whether the mortality can be attributed to an eligible natural disaster or other qualifying condition, and identify any affected counties that satisfy the requirements for designation as primary disaster areas, along with any contiguous counties eligible for assistance as a result of such designation.

A timely response is critical given the scale of the reported mortality and the potential consequences for future oyster production. Providing affected producers with access to available disaster assistance will help preserve aquaculture operations, protect jobs, and support the broader seafood economy throughout Coastal Virginia.

Thank you for your attention to this matter and for USDA's continued support of Virginia's agricultural and aquaculture producers. We appreciate your prompt consideration of this request and stand ready to provide any additional information that may assist the Department's review.

Sincerely,



Jen A. Kiggans
Member of Congress
Virginia's Second District



Rob Wittman
Member of Congress
Virginia's First District