

## TESTIMONY OF VIRGINIA OLSEN

ON BEHALF OF THE INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF MACHINISTS AND AEROSPACE WORKERS  
TO THE UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES

SUBCOMMITTEE ON WATER, WILDLIFE, AND FISHERIES

April 18, 2023

Chairman Bentz, Ranking Member Huffman, and honorable members of the committee, thank you for providing me the opportunity to testify today. My name is Virginia Olsen. I am a 5<sup>th</sup> generation lobsterman from Stonington, Maine and Director of the Maine Lobstering Union Local 207 of the International Association of Machinist and Aerospace Workers.

We oppose HR 1213 “Restoring Effective Science-based Conservation Under Environmental laws protecting Whales Act of 2023”

I work with both Union and non-Union fishermen up and down all 3500 miles of Maine’s coastline. When you think of Maine, you think of lobster, rightly so, Maine is the lobster capital of the world, we also have the largest fixed gear fishery in the United States. What we don’t have is right whales in any co-occurrence in the footprint of the Maine Lobster Fishery or Lobster Management Area 1.

As Maine fishermen we have repeatedly stepped up and done whatever was required of us to protect right whales; our compliance scores have historically been over 95% which attests to our commitment. When we first started with gear modifications in the 1990’s we were on board and thought what we were doing had a benefit to the whales. We removed thousands of miles of floating groundline, added in 600 lbs. break-a-ways links to surface buoys, we put more traps on a line allowing us to remove additional vertical lines. Now we have marked all our vertical lines with state and federal colors specific to the state we are fishing in. Inserted weak links in our vertical lines at various points rigged to break at 1700 lbs.

What I want you to take away from my testimony today is as fishermen we are not opposed to protecting the right whale- quite opposite, our history tells you we are vested in doing just that. The facts will tell you the largest fixed gear fishery has also never been linked to a right whale death, our last entanglement was 2004 and that whale is alive and thriving today. However, in a large part due to climate change, right whales are foraging for their food source, the copepod, farther and farther from the lobstering grounds of Maine lobstermen. Regulations only benefit the whale when the whales are present, and where there are no whales there is no justification for the regulation. Unnecessary regulations only erode public confidence in the Endangered Species Act (ESA) without any benefit to the endangered species itself. We must reduce risk where the risk exists.

The ESA has a vital role to play, and the Maine lobstermen support that role. The language in the Fiscal Year 2023 omnibus bill gives integral time to Maine's lobster industry, Maine's Department of Marine Resources (DMR), National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) to figure out how we can truly reduce risk for right whales. A great deal of work has gone into new technology for the fishing industry however it is not readily available nor ready for full industry implementation. This new technology still has critical functionalities that must be addressed for implementation with Maine's diverse fleet including where it will be used and when.

Rushing NOAA to implement new rules without quality research and fixing a broken system does nothing to protect right whales. Instead, it does everything to endanger a heritage fishery that not only my family, but thousands of others have participated in for generations. Lobstering in Maine is not what we do, it's who we are. In my grandfather's last years, wheelchair bound in the island's nursing home, his lobster license was more important to him than his ID. To him, he was, and always would be, a lobsterman. One of the founders of Stonington's Lobster Co-op and a recipient of Stonington's Fishermen's Hall of Fame award, his life revolved around the sea.

As fishermen we do not minimize the importance of protecting the right whale. As a community, we also do not minimize the value of our resources or the importance of a 1-billion-dollar industry to Maine's economy and the financial stability it provides to our coastal communities year-round. Ninety-three percent of all lobster landed in the United States is landed from the Gulf of Maine. The farther east you go in Maine, the more reliant our communities are on the lobster fishing industry. Other viable economic options are few and far between. Seventy-eight percent of the economic activity in the town of Stonington comes from fishing, and this is a common percentage in downeast Maine.

Without the critical time provided in the Fiscal Year 2023 omnibus bill you are putting over 5000 licensed lobstermen and positions that number in the tens of thousands in supporting roles in the unemployment line, and Maine's economy starts a race to the bottom that tourism alone can't handle.

For all of these reasons we oppose HR 1213. Thank you, and I am happy to answer any questions you may have.