



03 November 2020

State of Alaska  
Department of Health and Social Services  
COVID-19 Vaccination Task Force

RE: State of Alaska COVID-19 Vaccine Distribution Planning

Dear Commissioner Crum and members of the AK COVID-19 Vaccination Task Force Allocation Team:

We are writing regarding the State of Alaska's development of a distribution plan for COVID-19 vaccines as it is made available to states in the upcoming months and the State of Alaska's identification and classification of critical populations for vaccine allocation as part of that plan.

Our associations represent owners and operators of catcher vessels, catcher-processor vessels, processing vessels, and shoreside processing facilities engaged in Alaska fisheries. Collectively, our members represent a large share of the commercial fishing and processing activity in and around Alaska. Our member companies harvest and process billions of servings of seafood annually, feeding consumers in Alaska, throughout the United States, and across the globe. As part of the food and agriculture sector, our operations are identified as part of the critical infrastructure supporting our country.

We appreciate the challenges the State faces in preparing for and prioritizing the distribution of COVID-19 vaccines, particularly in early stages when supply will be limited. We also understand the need to first provide vaccines to our medical and health care first responders working on the front line of this pandemic and vulnerable populations. As you establish plans defining other critical populations for vaccine allocation, we ask that our employees be considered a high priority among other critical infrastructure essential workers for receipt of vaccines due to the importance of our industry to our country's food supply, the risk to our essential workforce, the challenges to preventing spread in our workplaces, the remote nature of our work both offshore and in remote coastal Alaska communities and the relatively limited health care infrastructure, and the ability to support vaccination efforts in underserved populations.

**Seafood workers are a critical population: Essential workforce operating in congregate settings**

The Alaska seafood industry employs in excess of 58,000 people annually. Many of these essential workers are employed in high-congregate seafood processing operations in remote locations both onshore and offshore and some represent minority or other populations disproportionately affected by COVID-19. Many employees are also at high risk of severe illness because of preexisting conditions or age. At many companies, as many as 75 percent of employees are from either disproportionately affected or high-risk populations.

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, our members have worked tirelessly, and at great cost, to develop and implement COVID-19 prevention and mitigation measures to minimize risk to employees

and the communities in which we operate. We have partnered with medical experts in Alaska to develop a system of quarantines and testing to prevent the spread of COVID-19. We likewise implement best practices in processing facilities and on vessels and educate our employees to limit potential exposure to COVID-19 both at and away from work. In doing so, we have to-date minimized outbreaks on our vessels, in our facilities, and within our partner communities. In partnership with the State and local public health officials, we averted closure of Alaska's commercial fisheries that produce over 60% of our country's seafood and contribute \$5 to \$6 billion in economic output to Alaska's economy every year.

Our members are uniquely challenged in maintaining the safety of our workers and communities while sustaining the supply of high-quality seafood to consumers. The logistics of working in remote locations and at-sea are already extremely challenging. Our workplaces are by necessity confined spaces where our employees live and work in congregate settings. Our ability to mitigate the risk of spreading the virus using barriers and engineering solutions is limited, and those measures often pose other safety risks by impeding movement around equipment. The state rooms and bunkhouses we use to house our employees are almost all congregate facilities with shared bathrooms. The high risk of transmission posed by these environments is shown by the degree of spread that has occurred on the few occasions when the virus has found its way onto a vessel. In those cases, 75% or more of the vessel crew were infected.

Seafood companies are working with healthcare providers in prevention, monitoring, and response to COVID-19 throughout the fishing seasons. The benefit of incorporating COVID-19 vaccine education and administration into our current COVID-19 prevention protocols will extend beyond our immediate workforce to their families and Alaska communities. In addition, acceptance of the vaccines should increase as information is disseminated to communities through our employees.

Thank you for your consideration. We would welcome an opportunity to talk with you in more detail on our operations and the need and value of prioritizing vaccine distribution to the seafood workforce.

Sincerely,

Chris Barrows  
President  
Pacific Seafood Processors Association

Stephanie Madsen  
Executive Director  
At-Sea Processors Association

Brent Paine  
Executive Director  
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