

April 19, 2008: Weekly Washington Update

The Commonwealth of Virginia is blessed with some of the most pristine natural beauty in world.

Many local economies depend on the revenues created by tourists visiting Virginia in hope of enjoying our waters, beaches, mountains and forests and the business generated from harvests of blue crabs, oyster and of the Bay's natural bounty. The Chesapeake Bay has long provided numerous opportunities for locals and tourists alike to fish, boat and enjoy a day at the beach. Unfortunately, over the years we have failed to adequately protect and preserve the Bay, and, as a result, its health has declined to the point of being in critical condition.

The Virginia Watermen's Association, an organization with many members who earn a living working the Bay, has chosen to stand in opposition to the current condition of the Bay. They correctly point out that a lack of action has been ruinous on local small businesses and their employees within the seafood industry.

This is particularly true of the blue crab fishing industry. The scientific evidence clearly points to a blue crab population in danger and necessitates a collaborative approach to ensure the long-term viability of this vitally important species. I recognize that the blue crab is only one piece of an entire ecosystem that needs attention in order to truly "Save the Bay." Another important component is improving water quality, which will require a significant effort by the entire Chesapeake Bay watershed. I am concerned, however, about the disproportionate burden watermen will surely face through heightened restrictions in order to restore the blue crab.

I recently wrote a letter to Governor Kaine urging him to declare a state of emergency and requested that state agencies provide assistance to watermen and businesses that will be affected by harvest restrictions. The Governor's office must make a request to the U.S. Secretary of Commerce in order for my colleagues and me in the Virginia Congressional Delegation to get involved at the federal level. The Department of Commerce can provide disaster assistance to the commercial fishing industry when it is affected by a commercial fishery failure, but first action must be taken by the Commonwealth. Congress plays a pivotal role by appropriating funds and providing oversight of the process.

Additionally, I have co-sponsored H.R. 5404, the Commercial Fishing Industry Health Care Coverage Act of 2008. The bill would establish a grant program to assist commercial fishing states to provide or expand low cost health care coverage for workers in the commercial fishing industry. This measure could provide additional assistance to watermen who are already struggling in a declining industry.

I agree with the Watermen and share their concern that this is a problem that demands we take serious and decisive action to clean up the Bay. That is why I am working in Congress to draft legislation that provides a comprehensive plan to clean up the Bay. Currently, there are several piecemeal efforts going on simultaneously, but unless these efforts are strategically coordinated, they will not be successful. I am in the process of meeting with agencies and organizations who are involved in Bay clean-up to get their points of view as I draft the legislation. As a Member of the Chesapeake Bay Watershed Task Force and the House Committee on Natural Resources, I will continue to support efforts to improve the health of one of our most valuable resources.