

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE – April 9, 2020

Freshwater Fishing Capital of the World Comes to a Halt

The Ontario Commercial Fisheries' Association (OCFA) represents the interests of commercial fishers and fish processors who collectively are responsible for over 1,100 jobs in the Province of Ontario.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, restaurants across North America have been closed by City, Provincial and State ordinances to flatten the curve. The economic and social consequences have devastated Ontario's commercial fishery. The OCFA's latest member engagement survey, conducted on March 27-29, highlights the crippling effects faced by operators:

- Most operators have experienced a near 100 percent revenue decline. There is no demand for freshwater fish.
- The processors long-standing distribution networks have dried up. Supermarket fish counters have been closed to minimize customer interaction. Bars and restaurants have been shuttered throughout Canada and the United States.
- Almost 100 percent of Ontario's fishing fleet remains tied to the dock, as the fishermen have no place to sell their catch. The start of spring fishing season will be delayed, with a strong possibility that the season will be completely lost.
- The industry is forecasting 80 percent of employees have or will be laid off.
- For most OCFA members, the recently announced three-month wage subsidy support will only extend operations by a few months. Without additional support, more layoffs will follow, leading to business closures and bankruptcies.

The economic impact on commercial fishers and processors has the potential to lead to disastrous social consequences for many small towns in Ontario. For local communities, the commercial fishery represents one of the most significant forms of employment. *"This is about survival,"* said Jane Graham, Executive Director to the OCFA.

The OCFA and its members are calling on support from Canadians as well as all levels of Government. The Association has identified four areas of support urgently needed by members:

- An extension on the wage subsidy to a minimum of 3 months after the stay and shelter orders are removed.
- Customized financial solutions from government and financial institutions that recognizes the uniqueness of the industry. \$40,000 loan programs and principal deferrals will not be enough to save companies and jobs.
- Members are requesting relief on royalty payments for the 2020 catch and possibly longer depending on when fishing resumes.
- Members urge Ontarians to buy local and consider supporting a key industry when choosing what protein to buy.

As the health crisis continues to build, the safety of our fishermen, employees, suppliers, processors, markets, and customers remains our number one priority. However, the resulting economic fallout that is gripping the fishery will have far reaching implications for all industry stakeholders for months and years to come.

For Media Enquiries:

Jane Graham – Executive Director

Email: jane.graham@ocfa.on.ca

Phone: (519) 676-0488

Industry Facts and Key Information

Economic impact

- Ontario is home to the largest freshwater fishery in North America. It plays a major role in the economic and social welfare of many communities that depend upon the commercial fishing industry for their viability.
- The Ontario Commercial Fishing Industry has been referred to as *The Freshwater Fish Capital of the World*. There was a recognizable commercial fishery before Europeans colonized what we now call Ontario.
- In 2018, the Commercial Fishing Industry in Ontario harvested 24 million pounds of fish with a landed value of more than \$44 million and contributed \$234 million to the Canadian Economy (MNRF).
- Ontario's commercial landings represent over half of Canada's total freshwater catch.
- The majority of fishers are small, independent businesses, many family-owned, and multi-generational.
- Over 80 percent of Ontario's processed fish production is exported with the majority into foodservice in the United States, which has evaporated overnight as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the National Restaurant Association, since March 1, the US restaurant industry has lost more than \$25 billion in sales, and roughly 50 percent of restaurant operators anticipate having to lay off more people in April. The National Restaurant Association further forecasts the industry will sustain at least a \$225 billion loss. This is a disaster for the Ontario Commercial Fishing Industry.

Lake facts

- Yellow Perch, Pickerel (referred to as Walleye in the US), whitefish, and smelt account for the majority of harvested land values.
- Ontario's commercial fishery operates in the Great Lakes on Lakes Erie, Huron, Superior and Ontario and the St. Lawrence River. In addition, licensed commercial fisheries operate in Lakes Nipigon, Rainy, Lake of the Woods and a few smaller inland lakes under the auspices of the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources.
- Over 80 percent of commercial fishing in Ontario occurs in Lake Erie (the warmest and most productive of the Great Lakes). Lake Huron represents the second highest producing lake.
- Lake Erie is the largest freshwater fishery in the world to achieve the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) certification. It was the fourth freshwater fishery in the world to achieve this distinction. MSC certification is the global gold standard verified by a third party that a fishery is well managed and sustainable. Lake Erie's MSC certification applies to Pickerel landed in its Canadian waters, as well as to Yellow Perch in both Canadian and US waters.

Impact of COVID-19

An industry survey was conducted March 27-29 to assess the impacts on operators of the COVID-19 pandemic.

- 74 percent of respondents are worried about a lack of cash flow to cover expenses. 48 percent a permanent business closure. The #1 concern among fishermen respondents was losing their business.
- 88 percent of respondents have had to reduce their level of employees or anticipate they will need to do so.
- The industry forecasts 80 percent of employees will be laid off, representing jobs in rural communities.

**Data sources: OCFA Survey, March 2020. Ontario Commercial Fisheries' Association Economic Impact Study, MNP, MNRF, Marine Stewardship Council.*