

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-1806

February 27, 2024

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., S.W.
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

We urge you to provide Emergency Assistance for Livestock, Honey Bees, and Farm-raised Fish (ELAP) funding to crawfish producers in Louisiana. Our state has long been the nation's leading crawfish producer and consistently supplies over 100 million pounds of crawfish per year, generating over \$300 million for the local economy. Louisiana crawfish producers suffered immensely from adverse weather in 2023. Because of the supply shortage, prices are soaring to \$13 per pound in January 2024 compared to \$6.04 per pound in January 2023. Through the ELAP statute, Congress gave the Department of Agriculture the discretion to provide assistance to farmers affected by severe weather, and we ask that you use it now.

While there are ongoing efforts in Congress to clarify the Livestock Forage Disaster Program and ELAP funding requirements and ensure federal assistance is accessible to crawfish producers, the existing statute already provides you this authority under 7 USC §9081(d). The ELAP language authorizes USDA "to provide emergency relief to eligible producers of . . . farm-raised fish to aid in the reduction of losses due to . . . adverse weather . . . as determined by the Secretary, that are not covered under [livestock indemnity payments or the livestock forage disaster program]." (emphasis added)

The definitions section of 7 USC §9081 defines "farm-raised fish" as "any aquatic species that is propagated and reared in a controlled environment." Crawfish fit squarely under the above definition. Crawfish are raised in rice fields that are manually flooded each fall, and these fields are where the crawfish reproduce, grow, and are eventually harvested between January and May.

Contrary to farm-raised fish, "adverse weather" is not defined under subsections (a) or (d), but rather it is left to the discretion of the Secretary. Louisiana certainly suffered from what the average farmer would consider "adverse weather" throughout 2023 due to extreme heat and drought, which has resulted in significant crawfish crop losses. Baton Rouge and New Orleans experienced record heat during the critical

reproductive season: August heat indexes in the state’s capital reached 115 degrees and New Orleans recorded two consecutive days with a high of over 99 degrees. Making matters worse, in Water Year 2023, 97.18% of Louisiana experienced D2 severe drought. During that time, Louisiana only had 39.85 inches of rainfall, which is 2 feet below the annual average. Since many crawfish farmers rely on rainfall for their harvest, these water shortages meant that producers experienced significant adverse impacts to their crawfish yields because of the drought.

As the Secretary, you have discretion under the statute to determine that the extreme heat and drought in 2023 is “adverse weather,” and we urge you to do so. Furthermore, the statute specifies that the ELAP section is to cover losses not covered under the other assistance programs. This provision establishes a flexible safety net to defend against setbacks from abnormal weather. Without your intervention, crawfish farmers are unlikely to receive any assistance and will incur millions of dollars in losses—which may push many out of business.

Louisianians enjoy long-held traditions during crawfish season, and crawfish boils have long been one of the best ways to welcome family and friends to our homes. Unless the Department of Agriculture acts now, the extreme heat and drought of the 2023 season will result in soaring costs that will price out many families from being able to enjoy a cuisine that is woven into the fabric of our state’s culture. The impact on our crawfish farmers will be even worse: many farmers will have to choose between operating at a huge financial loss or ceasing to operate at all. Considering the immense difficulties faced by both crawfish producers and consumers alike, we strongly urge you to use your statutory authority to provide assistance under ELAP funding to crawfish producers in Louisiana.

Sincerely,



Garret Graves
Member of Congress



Troy A. Carter, Sr.
Member of Congress