Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

September 12, 2012

The Honorable Rebecca Blank
Acting Secretary
U.S. Department of Commerce
1401 Constitution Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20230

Dear Secretary Blank:

On behalf of the State of Florida, we respectfully urge you to honor Governor Rick Scott's recent request for a fishery disaster declaration for Florida's oyster harvesting areas in the Gulf of Mexico—particularly those in Apalachicola Bay—based on Section 312(a) of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Management and Conservation Act.

Florida's oyster harvesting areas are currently experiencing extremely poor conditions, which have been exacerbated by the recent drought. In addition, the increased salinity in Apalachicola Bay encouraged more oyster predators, and the closure of oyster harvesting in other Gulf States during 2010 contributed to the oyster populations falling into very poor conditions. According to the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, production estimates for the 2012-2013 oyster harvesting season in parts of Apalachicola Bay are at the lowest levels reported in the past twenty years. Oyster densities decreased from 430 to 64 oysters per square meter from August 2011 to July 2012, and the quality of the remaining oysters is markedly down.

The Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services recently completed an assessment of the unique economic hardship affecting the oyster fishermen, processors, and their greater communities. This report estimates that 2,500 jobs will be negatively impacted because of current disruptions in the oyster fishing industry.

Disaster relief funds would help to determine the causes of the oyster decline, assess the feasibility of remedial actions, and provide relief to affected communities. We urge swift action from your Department in order to protect the viability of this important domestic industry.

Sincerely,

Senator Marco Rubio

Senator Bill Nelson

Representative Steve Southerland, II

Representative Jeff Miller

Representative Richard Nugent

PRINTED ON RECYCLED PAPER