

**Testimony of the State of Alaska**  
**Before the National Organic Standards Board**  
**June 9, 1999**

Good morning. My name is Marideth Sandler. I am Associate Director for International Affairs, Commerce and Transportation to Alaska Governor Tony Knowles in his Washington, D.C. office. I am also from Alaska. With me is Kate Troll, Fisheries Specialist with the Alaska Department of Commerce and Economic Development in Juneau, Alaska. We appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today to present the State of Alaska's position to include ocean-harvested seafood as an organically produced agricultural product and to answer your questions.

Thank you for making room in your agenda to consider this very important proposal. I know many of you have been involved for a number of years to make the concept of national organic standards a reality. We, in Alaska, applaud your efforts and your unwavering commitment.

The State of Alaska has been very interested in the implementation of national organic standards as well. As some of you may know, in response to our comments on the initial proposed rulemaking, we were directed by USDA Undersecretary Michael Dunn to work through the National Organic Standards Board (NOSB). We believe the reason for this is that House Conference Report (No. 101-916) for the Organic Food Production Act [and the bill in which OFPA is included (The Food, Agriculture, Conservation and Trade Act of 1990)] states that the Conference "Managers recognize the need to further elaborate on the standards set forth in the title and expect that by holding public discussions with interested parties and with the National Organic Standards Board", additional standards regarding animal production practices and materials will be developed." So we are happy to meet with you today to follow through on these directives.

My testimony will focus on why ocean-harvested seafood falls within the national standards for organic production. Following my testimony will be a short statement by Rick Marks, Fisheries Biologist with Robertson, Monagle and Eastaugh that represents a large number of fish constituencies in Southwest Alaska. Then we look forward to answering your questions.

I would like to begin by putting Alaska and Alaska's fisheries in context. As you can see from the brochure provided to you, Alaska seafood is natural, sustainable, and pure. Alaska is the only state in the nation with a Constitution requiring conservation and sustainability of natural resources. A good example of the actualization of this directive is the State's management of Alaska salmon. Escapement of spawning salmon is the Alaska Department of Fish and Game's first priority and is closely monitored and maintained from year to year. In Alaska, the biological integrity of fisheries is paramount. Harvest areas are closely monitored by field biologists who have the authority to open and close fishing efforts to achieve stream escapement goals. This is

referred to as in-season management. Alaska's in-season management approach has become a model among fisheries management agencies around the world.

In Alaska, pure water means pure fish. Studies conducted by both government and university scientists over the course of decades have repeatedly demonstrated that Alaska seafood is pure and clean, with little to no trace of contaminants. To give you a feel for Alaska fishing in pristine, clean waters, we have brought along a short video excerpt as well as a 30-second advertising spot which we will now show you.

Ocean-harvested seafood is intrinsically organic. Important to our meeting today, classifying ocean-harvested seafood as organically produced is consistent with the underlying policy and intent of the Organic Food Production Act of 1990.

First, let us look at the definition of organic food. House Conference Report No. 101-916 makes it clear that the Conference Managers relied largely on the Senate's definitions and explanation of those definitions when coming to agreement on the Bill. Reading from page 292 of the Senate Report (No. 101-357) titled "The Definition of Organically Produced Food": "Organic food is food using sustainable production methods that rely primarily on natural materials. The 'organically produced' label authorized under this bill therefore pertains to the production methods used to produce the food rather than to the content of the food."

- Ocean-harvested seafood uses sustainable production methods that rely primarily on natural materials. Therefore, production of ocean-harvested seafood meets the Senate's definitional intention. Because the Conference report adopted the Senate's definitional provisions [with amendments not affecting this definition (see page 1175 of the House Conference Report)], ocean-harvested seafood also meets Congress' intent as to the definition of an organically produced product.

Second, please note the definitional language says produced, and not grown. This is deliberate, as stated by 7 USC Section 6501 of OFPA. In that section, the third purpose of the legislation is "to facilitate interstate commerce in fresh and processed food that is organically produced." Similarly, in 7 USC Section 6504 of OFPA, the first National Standard for Organic Production is: "to be sold or labeled as an organically produced agricultural product under this title, an agricultural product shall (1) have been produced and handled without the use of synthetic chemicals, except as otherwise provided in this title;" Ocean-harvested seafood meets this standard.

Third, 7 USC Section 6513 lays out the requirements for organic plans. The Senate Committee viewed "the organic plan as a key element in organic production..." 7 USC Section 6513(c) states that an organic livestock plan shall contain provisions designed to foster the organic production of livestock consistent with the purposes of this title." The Act did not stipulate what the plan should include. We suggest that to meet the intent of the Act, an organic plan for ocean-harvested seafood from one or more specific regions in Alaska or elsewhere could be developed along the lines mandated for organic plans for wild crops, including:

- Designation of a harvest area;
- A management history;
- Confirmation that the harvesting process was not destructive to the environment and sustained the growth and production of the wild fish; and
- demonstrating that the producer applied no prohibited substances.

As previously mentioned, the application of sound science and prudent management is already an integral part of Alaska's seafood harvesting regime. Human oversight of ocean-harvested seafood has been and continues to be a key element. This occurs in the management of the fish stocks on a watershed or other regional basis, in the maintenance of fish quality during harvest, and in testing of seafood products.

There already is an industry-wide understanding and element of flexibility concerning the management and control of wild, organically produced food. The most widely-accepted example is organic honey, whose producers determine that it has not been contaminated by any substance during the foraging of the honeybees. The honeybee determination is parallel to the foraging of ocean-raised seafood.

Our position that ocean-harvested seafood should qualify as organically produced is supported by a number of people who are also very concerned about OFPA's integrity and implementation. They include members of the following entities:

- Institute of Agriculture and Trade Policy
- Organic Growers and Buyers Association
- Organic Consumers Association

In Alaska, ocean-harvested seafood is essential to our economy statewide, and to the economies of hundreds of our rural and very isolated communities. The seafood industry, like farming or ranching in other states, is Alaska's largest private sector employer. The wholesale value from Alaska's ocean pastures often exceeds \$1.2 billion annually, and is comparable to the livestock production value from Iowa's pastures. At the same time, the Alaska fishing industry is comprised of many small businesses, involving over 50,000 fishermen and 700 processors. The \$6 billion organic food market should not be closed off to them.

This summer, certifying agents from the Organic Growers and Buyers Association will use their wild harvest standards to certify sockeye and coho salmon in Cordova, Alaska. This pilot project involves inspecting the harvest and processing areas and producing a chain of custody tracking to ensure there are no additives from boat to shelf. The results of this pilot project and a similar one being done by Farm Verified Organic in Dillingham, Alaska, will be used in the certification regulations for Alaska's organic statute.

In summary, the State of Alaska strongly requests that the National Organic Standards Board recommend to USDA that ocean-harvested seafood is organically produced. Alaska ocean-harvested seafood is natural, sustainable, and pure. Most important to your

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work here today, we urge you to agree that Alaska ocean-harvested seafood meets the National Standards for Organic Production (7 USC 6504) because it is produced and handled without use of synthetic chemicals and can be produced and handled in compliance with an organic plan, as specified by the Act. Now, I'd like to ask Rick Marks to add a further perspective from the fishermen and processors on the Aleutian Chain in Southwest Alaska.