

Nick Hargrove

Wittman Wharf Seafood

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Good afternoon, everyone. My name is Nick Hargrove and I am a seafood processor here on the Eastern shore. I own two historic packing houses, the Old Ray J Jones packing house in Wittman and the old Harrison Oyster House on Tilghman island.

Before I get rambling on about Blue Catfish, I would like to thank Cassandra for all the help she has given me. We started working together over a year ago when I purchased the old Harrison Oyster House and property from Phillips Wharf Environmental Center. Having already owned a waterfront packing house we weren't sure we really needed a second one but asked to purchase the property we decided to take the leap and knowing it was the best option for our community to ensure that it would be there to support the fishing industry. Having no idea what it took to get an occupancy permit I reached out to Cassandra for some guidance, little did she know what she was getting into. This is where our story begins.

As many of you know the blue catfish has been a hot topic since Governor Wes Moore asked for federal assistance in combating the invasive species. But this wasn't always the case. The blue catfish have been in our waters since the 70's and since then have been wreaking havoc on our ecosystem with an estimated 150 million pounds currently swimming in our waters. I was a traditional seafood buyer and processor on the eastern shore, buying and processing oysters in the winter and buying and processing crabs in the summer. After a terrible year in 2022 buying, selling, and picking crabs we not only were exhausted but showed a loss for all our efforts at the end of the season. Wondering how we were going to make ends meet going into the 2022 oyster season, we knew we had to make a change, or we wouldn't be able to keep the doors open. We decided that we would turn the old oyster house into a

USDA certified Blue Catfish processing facility. I was approached by a gentleman who was a purchaser for the military, he told me that he purchased hundreds of thousands of pounds of blue catfish a year and was having trouble meeting the demand of the military. He asked if I thought I could convert the packing house in Tilghman to a USDA certified catfish processing facility. After doing some homework and learning everything that would be required to get certified we weren't sure that we could pull this off. But that same month the 2022 fall crab survey came out and showed the lowest number of crabs reported since they started doing the surveys back in 1990. The report showed that only 227 million crabs were estimated which may seem like a lot but compared to 2012 where there was an estimated 765 million we knew something was wrong.

I wanted to figure out where the crabs were going all, signs started to point back to the blue catfish, pictures started surfacing with blue catfish bellies full of dozens of crabs. This was the straw that broke the camel's back for me. Being frustrated with the crab industry and concerned for my friends and community that rely on the crabs for their livelihood I knew we didn't have a choice. We had a chance to become part of the solution and not the problem. The real work began. We started renovations on the building putting up waterproof paneling, epoxy floor coating, led lighting, large coolers and freezers purchasing insulated vats to store fish, trucks, boxes, label machines, ice machines, reaching out to fisherman to purchase their fish. We truly felt like a fish out of water by the end of the project. But we did it, and we began cutting in March. Fisherman were catching up to 70,000 pounds a day and we were hustling to keep up. Training my staff of oyster shuckers to learn to cut fish wasn't easy and I could not have done it alone. My plant manager, although doubtful if this was a good idea, believed in me and started to follow my lead. We spoke for hours on processes and procedures that could help ramp up our production. The community looked on and wondered what we were doing and was this going to work... they weren't the only ones. But we did it and we started to get our feet under us. Things started to get

easier, and orders started coming in ten thousand pounds, forty thousand lbs. We started to feel that we could pull this off and that we were gaining ground that we lost the precious summer.

We are currently processing 15 thousand pounds of fish a day. We sell to the Maryland and Capital food banks, helping to feed people in community with food insecurities, helping to ensure that kids have food to eat on the weekends when they aren't at school and providing dozens of fishermen with market for their catch that they didn't have before. We have been able to keep the price of the fish high and stable ensuring that the fisherman gets fair prices for their catch and compensated for their hard work. We send catfish overseas to feed our troops and are working with a hand full of other counties that are interested in our product. Out of everything that I've done in the seafood industry whether it be diving for oysters, captaining my own boat fishing 900 crab pots a day. This by far has been the most rewarding and shows the most potential for growth. As I said earlier, I could not have done this alone. Whether it was Cassandra that helped me navigate the county or my staff that looked at me wide eyed when I told them my plans to cut fish, they all believed in my vision and stuck by my side through the hard times. But we are not out of the woods yet. Unfortunately cutting 15,000 pounds of fish a day won't solve the blue catfish problem, but we aren't finished either. We need to get with the 21<sup>st</sup> century and get equipment that can ramp up our production so we can meet the demands of our customers and allow us to hire more employees as well as help save our ecosystem and crab population. This will require more time and investment to achieve our goal but at this point we do not have a choice, we will either sink or swim.

One of the questions I'm supposed to answer is what everyone in this room can do to help. Not being one that likes to ask for help unless I'm asking Cassandra for it. I've had a hard time coming up with this. I'd like to be part of the discussion when it comes to releasing the USDA requirement for the processing. Getting rid of the USDA could have a negative impact on our business. The USDA requirements allow us to sell our product to the military, food banks and prison systems. Without this

we wouldn't be able to sell our product. On top of that USDA gives grants and loans that help us grow our business. We should work on changing the regulations that put catfish into their own category in the USDA away from meat in poultry. This would loosen the rules but would still result in a safe product for the consumer, as well as keeping us eligible to get federal assistance that is needed to grow this industry in our state.

Lastly, we need to do something to slow down the importation of foreign crab meat. In June Venezuela jumbo lump was \$13.00 while local Maryland crab meat was \$36. The consumer "the restaurants" are purchasing less than 15% domestic crab meat because of the huge price difference. This in return is driving the price of crabs down to the waterman while picking house are struggling to move their meat. The processing plants in Venezuela are owned by crime organizations and use their product to get U.S. currency. This is crippling our fishing communities and having a direct impact on all of us. I'd like to see a tax or tariff put on foreign crab meat with the proceeds going back to rebuild Aquatic habitat and help combat the predation of caused by blue catfish, cownose rays, and snakeheads. If we don't, we are going to be known as the Chesapeake Bay home of the blue catfish not Chesapeake Bay home of the blue crab.

I'm honored to be given the chance to speak here today and want to thank everyone that has supported us and our fishing community. Thank you!

