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Senate Bill 433- Economic Development- Woman-and Minority Owned Shellfish Aquaculture
Enterprise Fund
Position: SUPPORT

To Senator Klausmeier:

My name is Imani Black and I'm an African American female from Chestertown, MD that's built a career in the shellfish aquaculture industry over the past 7 years. Due to the lack of support I felt through my early career years, in 2020, I decided to empower change with my own resources and founded a nonprofit organization, Minorities In Aquaculture (MIA). Over the last 2 years, MIA has become a global non-profit that strives to build a powerful network, impactful career development opportunities and useful resources for women of color to engage and build a career in the aquaculture industry on their own terms without the obstruction of the common barriers that minorities face everyday. MIA not only stands for our organization but for the demographic that's actively "missing in action" in the aquaculture industry as well. Without continuous access to resources proposed in this bill, minorities will continue to face education, accessibility and financial barriers which will prolong and hinder the restoration and preservation of our shellfish aquaculture industry for years to come. Historically on the Chesapeake Bay, minorities have played a huge role in the traditional practices of commercial fisheries although they have been marginalized and excluded from the evolution of our fishing industry in all sectors. Now, there are only 9 living Black boat captains, who are all over the age of 60, still operating in our watershed with no future generation coming to continue their legacy. By supporting minorities to participate in aquaculture, we preserve an important piece of our Chesapeake heritage and strengthen our commercial fisheries at the same time. **As an individual and organization, Minorities In Aquaculture strongly supports Senate Bill 433 and respectfully recommends a favorable vote on SB433.**

In my 7 years in aquaculture, I've worked at some of the best oyster hatcheries, nurseries and farms along the Chesapeake Bay maintaining positions as Hatchery Technician, Assistant Nursery Manager and Hatchery Manager within those facilities. Throughout my career, I have never worked with or engaged with any minority women within shellfish aquaculture that has owned, operated and/or obtained a leadership position in a hatchery or farm operation. For the majority of 2020, I was recognized as the ONLY African American female actively working in the shellfish aquaculture industry from Maryland to Florida. Currently, Maryland only has ONE minority owned oyster farm in the entire state which is Orchard Point Oyster Company in Chestertown, MD founded & operated by Scott Budden. As I reflected on those alarming facts and my own career experiences, I realized that minorities, but especially women of color, have never been given the resources or tools to become involved in the shellfish industry. As a minority female in a white male dominated field, I desperately needed resources that would not only help me feel safe and supported in my career, but also provided an experience that allowed me to see a role as a contributing member of Maryland's historic fisheries.

In order to turn around the historic barriers that have hindered minority involvement in Chesapeake fisheries, we respectfully recognized that in order for this bill to be truly impactful it must be developed with those barriers in mind by incorporating different goals, techniques, outcomes and guidelines from past resources. It's important as this bill process moves forward, that organizations and individuals involved are determined to make this opportunity one that will work with and enhance the engagement of minorities, and be another loan program that will later on in their future be a burden or obstacles that puts them back where they started.

For the sake of the future of the Chesapeake Bay, our shellfish aquaculture industry and the preservation of our historical heritage on the water, I urge leaders in Maryland to impactfully invest in the diversity, equality and inclusion of our maritime education, engagement and most importantly, accessibility for all demographics demonstrated by SB 433. I believe that these efforts and investments will support a healthier oyster population, the shellfish industry overall and benefit future generations of innovators, leaders and supporters to continue to advocate for the Maryland shellfish industry.

For those reasons, myself and the Minorities In Aquaculture organization, request a favorable vote for SB 433.