

Testimony of Julie Packard, Executive Director, Monterey Bay Aquarium
Informational Hearing: “The Economic Power and Resilience of California's Tourism Industry”
Committee on Arts, Entertainment, Sports, Tourism, and Internet Media
California State Assembly
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Thank you, Chair Quirk-Silva and Committee Members, for the opportunity to testify today about the Monterey Bay Aquarium and the impacts of the pandemic on our institution and region – and on aquariums across the state.

This is an extraordinarily challenging time and unlike anything we have ever experienced in Monterey, where the Aquarium has served as an anchor of the tourism economy since we opened our doors in 1984. When my family founded the Aquarium, we never imagined that a crisis like the one we are in today would come so close to threatening our very existence.

As of October 13, Monterey Bay Aquarium has been closed to visitors for seven months. Based on the trajectory of the pandemic in Monterey County, we still don't know when we will be allowed to reopen.

The Monterey Bay Aquarium spends approximately \$1 million dollars per month on animal care alone. Without any admissions revenue to support these services, our aquarium – like other California aquariums and zoos – has been forced to make drastic cuts in other parts of our budget. This included the heartbreaking loss of over 200 members of our staff as we face a \$55 million revenue loss this year.

Like you, we are committed to the safety of all Californians as our top priority, which is why we have worked with health professionals to design rigorous, data-driven safety measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 among our staff, our visitors, and even our animals. And we have joined with aquariums across the state to adopt a consistent set of protocols for our institutions that exceed those of other sectors.

These aggressive steps to protect public health are needed because aquariums and zoos cannot shut down our core operations in response to the COVID-19 crisis. We have an obligation to maintain essential services for the thousands of animals in our care. But this care has come at a significant financial cost, putting the future of our aquarium – and aquariums and zoos across the state – in particular peril.

In addition to the devastating impact our closure has had on our revenue and personnel, it has also undermined our role as a driver of Monterey County's \$3 billion dollar tourism economy. In 2019, our Aquarium welcomed 2 million guests, including over 100,000 California students and teachers admitted free of charge. Visitors are the lifeblood of the Monterey Bay economy. Our cities rely heavily on sales and hotel taxes from visitors to sustain vital health, safety and other public services. This year, Monterey County will lose \$40 million in tax revenue and the projected losses for next year are triple that total. Compared to 2019, that is a 73% decline. In addition, over 7,500 hospitality workers are currently unemployed in Monterey County.

Despite the closure of the Aquarium, we continue to serve the public. We have hosted nearly 40,000 students, most from California, for free online distance-learning classes, in English and Spanish. This month, we'll begin offering virtual field trips, serving as many as 500 students a week from across the state – all free of charge. But without getting back in business, we can't continue to deliver these services indefinitely. In addition, aquariums provide hope, solace and a place to connect with animals and the natural world that is incredibly important right now.

We need you to join us in a three-pronged approach to help: First, to increase support for COVID-19 prevention and recovery in our communities. Second, to help us to open. Third, to work with us to find sources of financial relief.

Most importantly, we need to take action to protect communities and workers most at risk from COVID-19. The Monterey Bay Aquarium wholeheartedly endorses the state's new health equity metric, which will help ensure that the people who are most affected by COVID-19 are given the support they need.

In Monterey County, 78% of people infected with COVID-19 are LatinX, and many positive cases are occurring among the farmworker community in Salinas and the Salinas Valley. These workers are essential, yet they lack the essentials of economic security, citizenship, housing and health care. This inequity demands our collective attention.

The Aquarium is working closely with community-based organizations, health care professionals, agriculture, hospitality, county government and foundations, including the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, to promote a stakeholder-driven approach to addressing the crisis in our community. We need your support to focus state resources in the regions in California that need it most, including Monterey County.

Second, all California aquariums that meet the state's strict reopening guidance must be allowed to open in Tier 1 and not be subject to repeated opening and closing as they are now. Right now, Monterey Bay Aquarium, California Science Center, and Cabrillo Marine Aquarium are the only three Association of Zoos and Aquariums accredited facilities in the nation that have not been allowed to reopen. This is because our counties are in Tier 1, also known as the Purple Tier.

Although we have stricter state-mandated reopening requirements than other indoor establishments, aquariums in Tier 1 counties are not allowed to open – even at just 25% capacity – while the state allows other non-essential indoor establishments – like shopping malls – to open. Our reopening requirements include mandatory pre-visit symptom screenings, one-way visitor paths, mandatory masks for everyone over age 2 and timed-ticket admissions sold only via advance reservations.

Under these COVID-19 safety measures, we will host far fewer people in the building than under normal conditions. For example, more than 8,000 people may be in the Aquarium at a time on a peak summer day. At reduced capacity, we estimate that there may be just 500 people at any one time in the Aquarium. And they will likely stay for a shorter period of time due to safety modifications like the closure of our auditorium and children's play areas.

Aquariums across the country are already taking a cautious approach to reopening, and to date not a single one of more than 30 AZA-accredited aquariums in other U.S. states has reported a COVID-19 transmission linked to their facility.

And third, California aquariums and zoos desperately need financial relief. Staggering revenue losses paired with the high cost of animal care – care that we cannot stop providing – have brought our institutions to the brink. To date, Monterey Bay Aquarium has been entirely left out of enacted federal COVID relief. With a necessarily slow reopening pace, and limits on visitor capacity, the fate of California’s aquariums and zoos will remain in jeopardy for months – if not years – to come.

We understand that our entire state is in need right now. That is why our Aquarium, along with our peers across the nation, continue to press at the federal level for state and local relief in coronavirus funding bills. Today I am asking you to include aquariums and zoos in state relief strategies that will enable us to continue to advance the state’s education and conservation goals, while also helping us serve as economic multipliers in our communities.

The Monterey Bay Aquarium, like other mainstays of California’s tourism economy, is facing the biggest threat to our existence we’ve ever known. California's aquariums and zoos are bedrocks of our communities, in addition to being known around the world as leaders in science, education and conservation. We are well-prepared to face our new reality with the highest standards of health and safety, but we need your help to survive this crisis and continue to serve the public into the future.