

Catfish and Public Policy

The Administration can score an important food safety victory for American consumers by enacting the provision of the 2008 Farm Bill Congress approved more than 22 months ago ensuring that all catfish products –domestic and imported --meet the health and safety standards that Americans have come to expect from USDA regulations and inspections of beef, poultry and pork.

About 5.2 billion pounds of seafood were imported into the United States from foreign countries in 2008. However, the FDA inspected only two percent of all those imports, including catfish products. (GAO report at <http://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-09-258>)

Among the two percent of seafood imports from Vietnam inspected by the FDA during a recent four-year period, nearly one in every five seafood shipments--including catfish and related species--was contaminated with potentially dangerous chemicals or drugs that are banned by the United States in farm-raised catfish, according to the FDA. (<http://www.fda.gov/Food/FoodSafety/Product-SpecificInformation/Seafood/SeafoodRegulatoryProgram/ucm150954.htm>)

In November 2009, the Alabama Department of Agriculture & Industries examined catfish and related fish imported from five Asian countries and discovered that one out of every three of those imported fish tested positive for harmful antibiotic drugs that are banned for use in fish in the United States because of potential health and safety dangers to consumers. Those imported fish from China, Vietnam, Cambodia, Indonesia and Thailand would have landed on Alabama dinner plates if state authorities had not intervened.

Congress voted to fix this problem in the 2008 Farm Bill by shifting regulation of catfish products from the FDA to the USDA. But 22 months later, this regulation which could help protect the American consumer, has been mired in bureaucracy. OMB has delayed the rule indefinitely and the USTR is now weighing in with concerns that high food safety standards may antagonize some trading partners. Trade

should never trump food safety. With this Administration's emphasis on food safety, the broadest possible definition of this rule will be most beneficial to protecting the health and safety of American consumers. A "broad" definition covers all catfish and catfish-related species, while the "narrow" definition sought by opponents seeking to water down the protections would cover only U.S. and Chinese catfish, leaving American consumers vulnerable to contamination and pathogens that could be found in other imported Asian catfish relatives.

In addition to the safety of Americans, this rule will have a tremendous impact on jobs in my home state of Mississippi. Mississippi represents 78% of the catfish production in the United States. Unfortunately, our acreage and production numbers are down and so are the jobs associated with production. In previous years we had nearly 95,000 acres in catfish production. Today, we have 70,000 active acres and the feed mills associated are running at 80% capacity compared to last year. In previous years, Mississippi had over 16,000 people working in the catfish industry but that number is currently down to less than 10,000 employees. Even though our industry is facing challenges, they remain extremely committed to providing a safe product for the American consumer.

The entire debate surrounding this catfish rule hinges on one brutal fact—the foreign fish is simply less safe than the fish grown domestically. If the foreign fish was grown using safe techniques, it would pass the inspection test with flying colors. However, the trade interest groups who have injected themselves into this debate are fully aware that foreign fish is inferior to fish grown domestically. I respectfully urge OMB to swiftly produce a broad definition that will help secure the nation's food supply.