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PRESS RELEASE

For Immediate Release:
November 10, 2009

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CONTAMINATED ASIAN CATFISH DISCOVERED BY ALABAMA LABS HIGHLIGHTS URGENCY OF IMPLEMENTING LAW REQUIRING USDA INSPECTIONS AND REGULATIONS

JACKSON, Miss. (Nov. 10, 2009) – The Alabama Department of Agriculture & Industries halt on the sale of imported Asian catfish and related fish contaminated by banned drugs underscores the urgency of implementing a Congressionally-approved law for tough, USDA inspections and regulations of imported catfish and catfish-like products, according to the Catfish Farmers of America.

The contaminated catfish products, which had slipped through the Food and Drug Administration's weak safety net, tested positive for antibiotic Fluoroquinolones banned for use in fish or other seafood products sold in the United States because of the health and safety danger to consumers.

Alabama's findings come as U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack is weighing a decision on how to implement a law approved by Congress last year shifting responsibility for the inspection and regulation of imported and domestic catfish and related fish from the FDA to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). That law requires that catfish and catfish-like products meet the same stringent USDA health and safety standards as beef, poultry and pork.

“The contamination found in the Asian fish tested by Alabama authorities demonstrates the urgency of this health and safety issue,” said Joey Lowery, president of the Catfish Farmers of America. “We need Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack to enact this law now in the most comprehensive manner possible. It will help ensure that all imported catfish and catfish relatives meet the toughest regulations and inspections that will protect American consumers and make certain that imported fish meet the same standards for quality and safety as our U.S. Farm-Raised Catfish.”

Last year, the FDA inspected only 2 percent of the 5.2 billion pounds of seafood imported into the United States, according to the Government Accountability Office.

The U.S. Congress, responding to evidence of serious problems with the quality of imported catfish and related fish, as well as inadequate inspection and regulation by the FDA, voted as part of the 2008 Farm Bill to move inspections and regulation of those fish to the USDA. Secretary Vilsack, who has made food safety one of his top priorities, is now considering whether to require that all domestic and imported catfish and related fish – including basa, pangasius and swai from Southeast Asia – meet USDA standards, or only domestic and Chinese catfish.

In fact, Chinese catfish represented only 29.7 percent of all foreign catfish products imported into the United States in 2008. Imports from Vietnam totaled 52.2 percent of foreign catfish-like products sold in America, and another 12.3 percent were from Thailand.

“Applying USDA regulations to only Chinese imports will not provide the protection American consumers need,” Lowery said.

The Alabama laboratory test results announced last week found the high percentages of contamination among the catfish relatives imported from Vietnam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Thailand and China.

Among the two percent of seafood inspections conducted by the FDA in the first nine months of this year, authorities found Vietnamese basa – a catfish-like – contaminated with salmonella and illegal veterinary drugs, according to the FDA’s Import Refusals data base. But that is only a small sampling: Fully 98 percent of all seafood imports entering the United States from foreign countries are not inspected.

“There is absolutely no way to determine whether all these imports are safe from contamination or harmful chemicals that aren’t allowed here in the U.S.,” said Lowery. “We want USDA approval that every catfish product imported into America meets the same rigorous standards for quality and safety as our U.S. Farm-Raised Catfish.”

Alabama Commissioner Ron Sparks, in calling a halt to the sale of contaminated imported Asian catfish and related fish, said emphatically that contaminated fish “will never make it to the dinner plates in Alabama.”

“Our question is: Why should the rest of American consumers have to wait for the same protection from their government,” said Catfish Farmers of America President Lowery.

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