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PRESS RELEASE

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U. S. Catfish Industry urges federal government to protect American consumers from unsafe catfish imports

JACKSON, Miss (Feb. 16, 2010) -- The Catfish Farmers of America today urged the U.S. government to act soon to impose stringent new health and safety requirements on imported and domestic catfish and related fish after federal officials announced new delays in enforcing a Congressionally approved law.

“This new delay is a setback for the American consumer—especially coming from an administration that has said food safety and protecting the health of American families is one of its top priorities,” said Joey Lowery, president of the Catfish Farmers of America, an organization representing more than xxx U.S. catfish growers.

The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) [or USDA] announced it would delay by up to xx days a decision on imposing a Congressionally approved law requiring imported and domestic catfish to meet the same tough inspections and oversight the U.S. Department of Agriculture imposes on meat and poultry.

Currently FDA, which is responsible for the inspection of catfish and other seafood, inspects only two percent of the 5.2 billion pounds of seafood imported into the United States from foreign countries, according to the Government Accountability Office.

The U.S. Congress, responding to evidence of serious problems with the quality of imported catfish, voted to move catfish inspections and regulation from the FDA to USDA as part of the 2008 Farm Bill. The issue has been debated for more than 20 months by the federal agencies charged with applying the law. Seafood importing lobbies have opposed the tougher health and safety regulations, claiming it would impose unfair trade restrictions on fish imported from foreign countries.

“This is an urgent health and safety issue, pure and simple,” said Lowery. “There could be no better advertising for imported catfish than to have the USDA seal of approval stamped on the package.”

Lowery stressed the law would apply to all U.S. Farm Raised Catfish as well as imported catfish and similar species.

“We welcome the USDA oversight on our U.S. Farm Raised Catfish,” said Lowery. “We want the American consumer to be 100 percent confident that every catfish he or she eats meets the highest standards possible.”

Much of the internal debate over the implementation of the law has been over whether to subject only catfish raised in the U.S. and China to the tougher regulations, or to expand the definition of catfish to all related fish. That would require fish such as “tra,” “basa,” and “panga,” raised in Vietnam, Indonesia, Thailand and other countries to meet the more stringent health and safety regulations as well.

Environmental groups including Environmental Defense, the Audubon Society and Food and Seafood Watch have rated U.S. Farm Raised Catfish among the healthiest and environmentally-friendly seafood on the market. Those same groups, along with the U.S. federal and state agencies, have raised warnings about catfish imported from China, Vietnam and other Asian countries, citing cases in which imported catfish were contaminated with antibiotic, pesticide, carcinogenic and bacterial residues.

“There is little government regulation of farming operations,” Environmental Defense Fund said in its comprehensive report on commercial fish. “Most Vietnamese catfish are grown in cages suspended under barges in the Mekong Delta.”

“Under the government’s new proposed regulations, there is absolutely no way to determine whether all imports are safe from contamination or harmful chemicals that aren’t allowed here in America,” CFA President Lowery said. “We support the widest possible safety net for U.S. consumers. How can consumers be sure of what they’re buying if there are big holes in the inspection standards?”

Among the two percent of seafood imports from Vietnam inspected by the FDA during a recent four-year period, nearly one in every five shipments was found to contain catfish and other seafood products contaminated with potentially deadly chemicals or drugs that are banned by the United States in farm-raised catfish, according to FDA records.

The broader safety inspections that would cover all imported and domestic catfish and related fish received strong bipartisan support in the U.S. Congress.

Sen. Blanche L. Lincoln (D-Ark.), chairman of the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry, and Sen. Thad Cochran (R-Miss.), a ranking member of the Senate Appropriations Committee, urged the administration to “support a broad definition of catfish that will ensure that catfish products meet the standards for safety that Americans have come to expect from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA.)”

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