

REPORT RAISES ALARMS ON CONSUMER HEALTH RISKS OF IMPORTED CATFISH

Potential Long-term effects most serious: Longer illnesses, immunities to life-saving drugs

A report by Exponent Inc.'s Center for Chemical Regulation and Food Safety raises new alarms over the potential long-term consumer health risks of imported catfish grown in contaminated water and treated with drugs banned for use in U.S. fish-farming.

Nearly one-third of all catfish sold in America is imported from Vietnam and China, where fish farming environments are far less controlled and the incidence of contamination is much greater than in the United States.

Eating contaminated imported fish could have serious long-term human health consequences, including longer-lasting illnesses due to antibiotic build-ups that leave people less responsive to antibiotic medications and an increase in drug-resistant pathogens that can be transmitted to humans via the food chain.

Analysts also cited dangerous short-term health impacts, finding that imported catfish are twice as likely to be contaminated with salmonella as domestic fish.

The report stressed the importance of identifying risks and imposing appropriate controls before consumers contract illnesses that could frighten them from eating fish.

The report recommends that the USDA regulatory program that includes evaluations and inspections of catfish production and processing will provide stronger oversight and consumer safety than current government inspection programs. Congress approved a law shifting catfish oversight to USDA two years ago, but the law has not been implemented.

Consumers generally are unable to distinguish one type of catfish from another, particularly once the fish is prepared for sale or consumption. In revising the food safety inspection program to provide greater consumer protection, Exponent recommended that the broader biological classification of catfish be used to include all imported and domestic catfish species. The different species of catfish occupy the same product niche and frequently are interchanged in the U.S. marketplace.

Key findings in the report include:

DANGERS OF IMPORTED CATFISH

- Nearly one-third of all catfish sold in America is imported. Of those imports, 52 percent are from Vietnam and about 30 percent are from China.
- FDA import inspections from 1998 to 2004 have shown consistently that fish and seafood products have one of the highest rates of import refusals due to food safety issues. The presence of harmful microorganisms and unapproved drugs is a frequent reason for refusals.
- Imported fish from Vietnam and China are produced in much less controlled environments with many more opportunities for microbiological and chemical contamination. Vietnamese farmers use water directly from the Mekong River with most farmers using no screen against contaminants.

- Fish are frequently transported to the processing plant by boats that have tanks or cages flushed with polluted river water.

HEALTH DANGERS POSED TO HUMANS FROM CONTAMINATED IMPORTS

- Antimicrobial residues in catfish and other foods is an emerging worldwide health concern.
- Prohibited antimicrobials detected in imported catfish include Malachite green and Gentian violet, the latter of which has been linked to human bladder cancer.
- The widespread prophylactic use of antibiotics, particularly fluoroquinolones, in Asian countries which are not approved for use in the U.S. These antibiotics, which usually are administered in feeds to prevent bacterial infections and promote animal growth, are receiving particular scrutiny.
- These drugs can cause harmful microorganisms to become resistant to the drugs. When drug-resistant microorganisms infect humans who eat or handle the fish, illnesses can be more severe and more difficult to treat.
- The FDA this year has issued an import alert for catfish raised in China because of the presence of potentially dangerous drugs.
- A published study showed that imported catfish from Vietnam were twice as likely as domestic catfish to be contaminated by salmonella.

BENEFITS OF CATFISH INSPECTION BY USDA

- USDA requires that countries exporting products to the U.S. have inspection programs equivalent to the U.S. program based on USDA review.
- USDA requires continuous inspection of the foods it regulates.
- USDA sets standards for microbial hazards, tests for contamination, tests production facilities, and evaluates individual facilities.
- USDA regularly conducts foreign inspections of producers who export to the U.S.
- In the last 11 years, the USDA's regulatory program has decreased Salmonella prevalence in all classes of products it inspects.
- USDA has not certified either China or Vietnam to ship USDA-regulated raw, non-processed products from any meat animal to the U.S.