

Fair Trade With Asia Sought by U.S. Catfish Farmers as Congress/Administration Move on Vietnam Treaty

USA's Largest Aquaculture Industry Warns House of Continuing, Serious Safety & Labeling Problems With Asian Fish Imports; Federal Inspections 'Inadequate'

WASHINGTON, Oct. 20 /PRNewswire/ -- "Continued use by Asian fish farmers of banned antibiotics and a carcinogenic chemical in fish exported to the United States must be addressed by the federal government as freer trade relations are sought," said Roger Barlow, president of The Catfish Institute, a nonprofit organization based in Jackson, MS, that promotes U.S. farm-raised catfish, the nation's fourth most popular seafood. "Dangerous additives banned for human consumption in the U.S. are routinely found in imported Vietnamese basa and tra and in Chinese channel catfish, and Vietnam continues to mislabel seafood coming into this country. While Asian seafood imports are growing rapidly, federal inspections and testing of this food remains inadequate, at best."

The concerns of U.S. farm-raised catfish farmers, comprising America's largest aquaculture industry, were explained in an October 13 letter to House Ways and Means Committee Chairman Bill Thomas (R-CA) and the Committee's Ranking Democrat Charles Rangel (D-NY). The Committee, which has jurisdiction over trade treaties, and full House and Senate are expected to quickly approve legislation (H.R. 5602/S. 3495) authorizing permanent normal trade relations with Vietnam following the November 7 election.

Among the banned substances found in seafood imported from Vietnam and China are flouroquinolones, a family of strong antibiotics that include Cipro used to treat anthrax. Unnecessary ingestion of these drugs will cause consumers to build-up a resistance to these critical pharmaceuticals. Malachite green, a strong industrial dye and known carcinogen used in Asia as a fish egg fungicide, has also been found in Vietnamese basa and tra and Chinese channel catfish imported into the U.S.

With a Vietnam trade treaty now before Congress and President Bush planning a mid-November trip to Hanoi to meet with members of the Asian Pacific Economic Cooperation group to promote free trade, the spotlight is now on Vietnam.

"Vietnam's continued use of these substances cannot be excused or condoned by the use of these same chemicals within the aquaculture industry of China, its giant neighbor and competitor," Mr. Barlow said.

"In addition to using harmful banned chemicals, Vietnamese exporters continue to mislabel basa and tra, using species names such as grouper, sole and pike, in order to evade antidumping duties and mislead buyers about the identity of the fish," Mr. Barlow continued. "The mislabeling is rampant: millions of pounds of basa and tra fillets are being shipped to the United States improperly labeled. Although some federal criminal indictments have been brought and convictions won, the practice continues to be a serious problem."

Such mislabeled imported fish frequently end-up misidentified on restaurant menus. A study by the ST. PETERSBURG TIMES published on August 8 found that half of the "grouper" listed on menus in eleven Florida restaurants was actually cheaper imported species, including Vietnamese basa. DNA testing of fish in restaurants in other regions of the U.S. has found similar results.

Producers of Vietnamese basa and Chinese catfish have been the subject of at least ten import alerts issued by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration since June 2005 because of banned antibiotics and malachite green. At present, however, the FDA only tests two percent of all imports

coming into the U.S. each year and Asian fish imports are rapidly growing.

"American consumers have a right to know what they are eating," Mr. Barlow continued. "And, when they eat basa mislabeled as another fish, or basa containing banned chemicals, consumers are unwittingly being defrauded and, even worse, exposing themselves and their families to serious health risks."

While many fish species marketed in the U.S. today are raised on farms, growing conditions for Asian fish are typically far below the federal and state health and environmental standards met by American farmers. Aquacultured American catfish, for instance, are raised under environmentally controlled conditions in clay ponds using underground fresh water aquifers as well as rainwater. The ponds and fish are subject to standards set by the federal Clean Water Act, the Environmental Protection Agency, Food and Drug Administration, state health departments and other authorities. Indeed, only chemicals approved for use in U.S. drinking water may be used in U.S. catfish ponds.

By comparison, fresh water sources available for Vietnamese and Chinese aquaculture are heavily polluted with industrial wastes including heavy metals and human sewage. Banned chemical additives are believed to be used in an effort to clean-up fish destined for export.

"U.S. catfish farmers are not afraid of competition and our industry is on record supporting normal trade relations with Vietnam," Mr. Barlow continued. "But, we seek and deserve fair trade, not just free trade."

A copy of the complete letter to the House Ways and Means Committee follows:

The Honorable William M. Thomas, Chairman
Committee on Ways and Means of the
United States House of Representatives
1102 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Charles B. Rangel, Ranking Democrat
Committee on Ways and Means of the
United States House of Representatives
1102 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

October 13, 2006

Dear Mr. Chairman and Congressman Rangel:

As president of The Catfish Institute, a nonprofit group based in Jackson, Mississippi, and charged with promoting U.S. Farm-Raised Catfish, I am writing to discuss the issue of permanent normal trade relations with Vietnam, as authorized by H.R. 5602. While we are on record supporting PNTR for Vietnam, the U.S. Farm-Raised Catfish Industry would like to bring to the Committee's attention the continuing, serious problems with Vietnamese fish imported into the United States.

Catfish farming is our nation's largest aquaculture industry and catfish is the fourth most popular seafood in the United States. U.S. catfish farmers and processors believe it is important for Vietnam to fully participate in international markets and the laws governing their trade.

There remain, however, serious issues the United States must address with Vietnam both bilaterally and through World Trade Organization processes should Vietnam become a member of that organization. In particular, Vietnam's continuing use in its farm-raised basa and tra and other exported seafood of antibiotics and other additives banned for human consumption in the United States must be addressed.

Among the banned substances found are flouroquinolones, a family of strong antibiotics that include Cipro used to treat anthrax. Unnecessary ingestion of these drugs will cause consumers to build-up a resistance to these critical pharmaceuticals. Also found in samples of basa and tra is malachite green, a strong industrial dye and known carcinogen used in Asia as a fish egg fungicide.

Tests of basa and tra imported into the US, Canada, Europe and Australia routinely find these banned and dangerous substances. And, Vietnam's continued use of these substances cannot be excused or condoned by the use of these same substances within the aquaculture industry of China, its giant neighbor and competitor. Although use of banned substances is prevalent in a number of other Asian countries, the Committee and Congress are now focusing on Vietnamese production only.

In addition, Vietnamese exporters continue to mislabel basa and tra, using species names such as grouper, sole and pike, in order to evade antidumping duties and mislead buyers about the identity of the fish. The mislabeling is rampant: millions of pounds of basa and tra fillets are being shipped to the United States improperly labeled. Although some federal criminal indictments have been brought and convictions won, the practice continues to be a serious problem.

We are pleased Vietnam agreed in bilateral negotiations with the United States to continue to be treated as a non-market economy for the purposes of U.S. trade law, acknowledging the continuing non-market orientation of the Vietnamese economy. Existing antidumping duties covering unfairly traded imports from Vietnam of certain species of fish fillets competing with U.S. Farm-Raised Catfish will not negatively be affected by granting Permanent Normal Trade Relations.

The U.S. farm-raised catfish industry believes granting PNTR and Vietnam's possible accession to the WTO should provide a framework for the U. S. to approach the Vietnamese Government on these difficult issues. Enforcement of U.S. anti-dumping measures and WTO rules coupled with stringent testing by the federal government of imported seafood from Vietnam will help protect American consumers and provide a more level playing field for domestic fish producers.

The U.S. Farm-Raised Catfish industry believes in fair trade, not just free trade.

For your information, please find attached excerpts from recent studies and articles in periodicals providing additional information on problems with Asian fish imports.

I appreciate your considering our views as you continue deliberations on HR 5602.

Respectfully yours,

Roger Barlow
President, the Catfish Institute

CONTACT: Roger Barlow, president, of The Catfish Institute in Jackson, MS: +1-601-977-9559; or Jeff McCord, trade consultant, for The Catfish Institute in Northern Virginia: +1-540-364-4769.

SOURCE The Catfish Institute