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PRESS RELEASE

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U.S. Catfish Industry Launches Campaign Urging USDA to Ensure Safety of Imported Catfish

JACKSON, Miss. (Oct. 16, 2009) – The Catfish Farmers of America this week launched a major advertising and public safety awareness campaign urging the USDA to enact a Congressionally-approved law requiring all imported catfish to meet the same stringent health and safety standards as imported beef, poultry and pork.

"We've launched this campaign because of 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. Nothing is more important than the health and safety of our families. U.S. catfish farmers fully support the toughest and widest-ranging regulations and inspections that will protect American consumers when it comes to catfish—both imported and domestic."

The Catfish Farmers of America advertising campaign is targeting D.C.-based decision-makers and opinion leaders.

While the USDA currently inspects and ensures the safety of all meat and poultry products sold in the United States, it does not inspect seafood. The inspection of seafood is conducted by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

Last year 5.2 billion pounds of seafood were imported into the United States from foreign countries. However, the FDA inspected only two percent of all imported seafood, including catfish, according to the Government Accountability Office.

"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 farm-raised catfish."

The Catfish Farmers of America started its “All Catfish Should Be Treated Equally” campaign this week because the administration has reached a critical point in the decision-making process for enacting the law.

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. USDA Secretary Vilsack, who has made food safety one of his top priorities, is now considering whether to require that all imported catfish meet USDA standards, or to include only Chinese “channel” catfish which are grown from young U.S. catfish stock.

Catfish products are also imported to the United States from Vietnam and Thailand where fish from the catfish family are called “tra” or “basa.” 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, was contaminated with potentially deadly chemicals or drugs that are banned by the United States in farm-raised catfish, according to the FDA.

In a bipartisan appeal, Sen. Blanche L. Lincoln (D-Ark.), chairman of the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry, and Sen. Thad Cochran (R-Miss.), ranking member of the Senate Appropriations Committee, urged Vilsack 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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