

# Catfish farmers seek inclusion

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STONEVILLE — No matter where or how it is grown, all food produced for human consumption should be subject to rigorous safety inspections, according to U.S. catfish farmers and their advocates.

The Delta Council's Board of Directors passed a aquaculture resolution at its 75th anniversary midyear board of directors meeting last week seeking inclusion of the catfish industry in the U.S. Department of Agriculture's food safety inspection program.

The resolution calls upon the agency and the Mississippi congressional delegation to work with the catfish industry to immediately authorize new oversight of aquaculture products.

"We want the USDA to treat catfish just like it does beef, pork and poultry," said John Phillips, chairman of the Delta Council executive committee, at the Nov. 6 meeting.

The measure is supported by Catfish Farmers of America, which has asked Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack to enact legislative provisions in the 2008 farm bill to ensure that domestic and imported catfish meet health and safety standards. The USDA currently regulates all meat products, but it does not inspect seafood.

The inspection of imported seafood is now administered by the Food and Drug Administration, but it reportedly inspected only 2 percent of all seafood, including catfish, in 2008, according to the catfish farmers association.

Only catfish and other species within the catfish family would be shifted from the purview of the FDA to the USDA under the proposal backed by the Delta Council and the catfish farmers group.

The U.S. reportedly imported 5.2 billion pounds of seafood in 2008.

The catfish farmers group complains that seafood processing lobbying groups, such as the National Fisheries Institute, are trying to get USDA inspections limited to "channel" catfish raised on domestic catfish farms and imported from China. That would leave out Vietnam's species of "tra" and "basa," which is from the catfish family.

The group claims that catfish grown in Vietnam comes from the Mekong River Delta, which reportedly is muddy and polluted with dangerous chemicals, and that one in five shipments inspected by the FDA in 2008 was refused entry to the U.S. because of contamination by illegal substances.

U.S. catfish farmers have long complained that substandard aquaculture is practiced in Asian countries. But critics of the group claim its motivation has more to do with profits than concerns about consumer safety.

Concerns have been raised that the catfish fight could lead to Vietnam purchasing smaller amounts of beef from the U.S. It is now the third-largest importer of American beef.

Joey Lowery, president of Catfish Farmers of America, said that his group's only motivation is consumer safety.

"U.S. consumers currently believe that their seafood is subject to the same rigorous inspection standards as those imposed on meat and poultry products," Lowery said in a letter published on the group's

Website. "However, that is not the case under the existing Food and Drug Administration standards, and the domestic catfish industry is dedicated to fighting for increased consumer food safety."

In other legislative and policy resolutions the Delta Council also urged:

n Support of the Mississippi River levee enlargement project, the Steele Bayou drainage project, the Sunflower River channel restoration project, the Upper Yazoo River channel enlargement and levee protection project, the North Mississippi flood control reservoir project and the South Delta backwater project.

n Strengthening groundwater monitoring programs, which have become less rigorous in recent years because of funding shortfalls.

n Continued development of Delta State University's teacher shortage and administrative leadership training programs, Mississippi Delta's regional pilot program for the coordination of workforce training programs, Delta Council's adult literacy program, Mississippi Valley State University's Itta Bena campus and Delta Health Alliance.

n Support of Commodity Credit Corporation loans and farm income protection in the 2008 Farm Bill and trade policy that protects and benefits U.S. cotton rice growers.

n Opposition to more restrictive eligibility provisions in farm programs.

n Support of the timely construction of U.S. Highway 82 Mississippi River Bridge, the I-69 Coalition, U.S. Highway 61 at Nitta Yuma bridge improvements and Highway 8's and Highway 6's enlargements to four lanes.