

USDA Takeover of Catfish

Windfall profits for the good ole boys that will affect your wallet

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Mississippi Senator Thad Cochran, chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee, arguably one of the most powerful men in America, is in charge of appropriating hundreds of billions of dollars of taxpayer money yearly. He also just so happens to represent an area of the country where virtually all the farmed catfish for the US is produced. Way back in 2008, Senator Cochran, at the behest of his constituents, inserted (without a Senate vote) a few sentences in the massive 2008 Farm Bill, transferring authority over all catfish from the FDA to the USDA. The mandate has remained unfunded until this year where it looks to become a reality.

The proponents are pushing this change under the guise of food safety. Well, gee wiz, that's news to me. Having been in the seafood business for only 35 years, surely there must be compelling evidence showing that catfish represent a clear and present danger above and beyond all other seafood categories and the USDA must be called to save the American public from this terrible catfish menace. An FDA study perhaps? Maybe a study by the National Academy of Sciences? NADA ZERO ZILCH — no evidence — they say there are toxins in the imported catfish. So the FDA doesn't test for toxins?

Okay, so let's suppose you believe this delusional argument about food safety. Who cares which agency is in charge of inspecting the lowly catfish? How will it ever affect me as a chef/restaurateur? Oh, it will.



You see, this transfer of authority also behaves like a trade deal. All shipments of imported catfish from China, Vietnam, Thailand, and even fresh catfish from the Caribbean will stop until “equality” is achieved. Not to bore you with the details of trade

negotiations but these typically take six to 10 years to hash out. So, when you take 400 million pounds of fish fillets (that is the total amount of imported catfish entering the U.S. last year), representing 1.6 BILLION meals, off the market EACH YEAR, the resulting vacuum will cause ALL FISH PRICES TO RISE DRAMATICALLY.

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The “good ole boys” stand to make boatloads of extra profits from this deal. When you get rid of all your competition through restrictive trade agreements, you are left with the fox guarding the chicken coop. A conservative estimate is that cat fillet prices will jump \$1 per pound. So, if the average plant cuts 30,000 lbs. daily, 600,000 lbs. monthly or \$7.2 million pounds annually, you can see how the money piles up quickly and even quicker if you multiply that times 16 companies. There is even enough money to fund 90 year-old Senator Cochran's re-election campaign fund into the next millennium. I hope he lives forever. Don't complain, we have the best political system money can buy. And in a year when the dark underbelly of American politics is front and center in our living rooms nightly, this story won't even make a good footnote.

As it is plain to see, the intent of

this legislation is to drive everyone out of the catfish business and in its present form, it will achieve this goal. When the USDA takes over, any wholesaler who even touches a catfish has to have their plant pass a USDA inspection, totally different standards than an FDA inspection. The USDA inspects multinational, billion dollar companies processing beef, chicken and pork. A dealer in North Carolina was told he had to make improvements to his facility totaling over \$700,000 just to continue handling catfish. A USDA inspector has to be on site anytime we touch a catfish. Not only do we have to schedule them three weeks in advance, they cost \$70 an hour over eight hours. Ludicrous you

say? No, it is actually genius on the part of the proponents. They knew exactly what they were doing when designing this.

When the dealers stop buying catfish because it is not worth the money or the hassle, THOUSANDS OF AMERICAN FISHERMEN and their families will suffer. They will have nowhere to sell their fish and if they do, the remaining buyers will have too many fishermen and not enough market resulting in lower dock prices for the fish. Commercial fishermen are the backbone of the US seafood industry providing locally caught sustainable seafood to area restaurants and retailers. They have neither the time or the money, in this case millions spent on lobbying, to plead their case on Capitol Hill, to our stellar representatives.

If you are still not convinced, there is an environmental argument to this also. The wild blue catfish

is invasive to the Chesapeake Bay and is now the top predator in the Bay's ecosystem. Native to the Ohio and Mississippi rivers, they were originally introduced into the James River in the late 70s. Since then their population has exploded, with wild blues occupying almost 74 percent of the total volume of fish in the James. Similar infestations are occurring in the Rappahanock, York and Potomac. These fish live for 20 years and grow to more than 100 pounds. They eat millions of blue crabs, menhaden, rockfish and many other native species. Blue cats are now in every single tributary in the Bay. USDA takeover of catfish would allow the continued assault on the entire Chesapeake Bay's ecosystem by these apex predators.

I'm not sure what, if anything further, we can do. The proponents of this are powerful people wired into the very top of our political system. Our current administration is against the USDA takeover. The Senate actually passed a bill, repealing the USDA's authority on catfish (boy I bet that got Senator Cochran's juices going!) but the House leadership (Paul Ryan — he is an outdoorsman who claims to be a conservationist) refuses to take up the bill.

One last thought. If you think this stops with catfish you are dead wrong. The domestic Gulf of Mexico shrimp producers are already lining up on Capitol Hill (through powerful lobbyists of course) saying they want the same deal the 16 catfish companies got. If they are successful in their efforts, you can look forward to seeing your shrimp prices jump 30 to 50 percent. Hold on to your wallets. Capitol Hill is just like a Trump casino, money talks and you know what walks.