November 13, 2013

**New Catfish Inspections Are Posing a Problem for a Pacific Trade Pact**

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WASHINGTON — A curious hurdle is threatening to complicate efforts by the United States to reach a major trade agreement with 11 Pacific nations by the end of the year: catfish.

At issue is a pending new catfish inspection program at the Department of Agriculture that would replace but cost far more than an existing catfish inspection program in the Food and Drug Administration. American catfish farmers say the new inspection program would be more rigorous than the one at the F.D.A. and is needed to make sure all domestic and imported catfish is safe to eat.

Vietnam, a large exporter of catfish and one of the nations in the trade talks, says it is nothing more than a trade barrier in disguise.

“And it’s not even a good disguise; it’s clearly a thinly veiled attempt designed to keep out fish from countries like Vietnam,” said Le Chi Dzung, who heads the economics section at the Vietnamese Embassy in Washington.

Last week, Vietnamese trade officials wrote to Secretary of State John Kerry, the White House and members of Congress and threatened trade retaliation if the program was not repealed.

“Our government is unwilling to sit by as this program is implemented,” the trade officials wrote, adding that American exports of beef, soybeans and other goods to Vietnam could suffer as a result.

Although catfish makes up only a small part of the commerce among the 12 nations involved in the trade talks, called the Trans-Pacific Partnership, it is a vital industry to Vietnam, where it accounted for $340 million of the country’s $1.3 billion in fish exports to the United States last year.

Some 250 million pounds of Vietnamese catfish, called pangasius, was exported in 2012 to the United States. Here it makes up more than 60 percent of the American market and is blamed for putting many domestic catfish farmers out of business.

In addition to the United States and Vietnam, the countries in the Trans-Pacific Partnership talks are Canada, Mexico, Peru, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, Australia and New Zealand. Together they account for about 40 percent of the world economy.

The duplicate catfish inspection program at the Agriculture Department has its roots in a 2008 farm bill provision won by Southern lawmakers, primarily Senator Thad Cochran, a Republican from America’s No. 1 catfish-producing state, Mississippi.

Mr. Cochran, the top Republican on the Senate Agriculture Committee, argued along with the catfish industry that imported catfish had to be subject to rigorous inspections and that the Food and Drug Administration should not be involved.

“The F.D.A. is understaffed and little inspection is done of the fish that comes into this country,” said Dick Stevens, the president and chief executive of the Consolidated Catfish Company in Isola, Miss., in an interview in July. “Fish raised in other countries have been found to have drugs in them. We’re just saying everyone should be held to the same standard.”

American food safety groups like [Food and Water Watch](http://www.foodandwaterwatch.org/) also support moving catfish inspections from the F.D.A., which inspects less than 2 percent of all imported foods, to a tougher system at the Agriculture Department.

“Many foreign catfish farmers add antibiotics and antifungals that are banned in the U.S.,” said a Food and Water Watch lobbyist, Tony Corbo. “That’s a legitimate concern.”

In recent years, domestic catfish farmers have been hammered by a combination of rising feed costs and competition not only from Vietnam but also from China. The domestic catfish industry has shrunk by about 60 percent since its peak a decade or so ago, and in the past few years some 20 percent of American catfish farming operations have closed.

Unspoken in the catfish dispute is an Agriculture Department regulation requiring that any country that exports meat or poultry products to the United States set up a domestic inspection system for that food that is equivalent to America’s — an expensive and burdensome regulation that Vietnam says is unnecessary for catfish.

In the meantime, the Agriculture Department has spent $20 million to set up the catfish inspection office, which so far has a staff of four, but has yet to inspect a single fish. The F.D.A. spends about $700,000 a year on its office.

The Agriculture Department’s catfish inspection program would be repealed in the House version of the current farm bill, but it remains in the Senate version despite objections from some lawmakers in both parties. The two chambers are in negotiations to work out their differences to come up with a new five-year farm bill.

Senator John McCain, Republican of Arizona, said the program reeks of wasteful government spending and has vowed to “deep-fry” it, while Senator Jeanne Shaheen, Democrat of New Hampshire, has objected to taxpayers subsidizing “a duplicative catfish inspection program.”

The Obama administration has also called for eliminating the Agriculture Department’s catfish inspection program.