

FDA may impose basa ban for antibiotic residue

SEAFOOD.COM NEWS [Associated Press] - August 19, 2005 - MOBILE, Ala., The U.S. Food and Drug Administration is nearing its decision on banning basa catfish from Vietnam, which has already been taken off the shelves in Louisiana and two other states.

F-D-A spokesman Mike Herndon says a decision could come next week on how the agency will rule on the multimillion-dollar catfish imports. The agency is under pressure from an Arkansas congressman for a nationwide ban.

Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana banned Vietnam basa catfish after officials detected antibiotics given to prevent disease in Vietnamese fish.

Herndon said F-D-A has the option of issuing an import alert or seizing the product or a combination of both.

If an import alert is issued, Herndon says any future basa fish from those areas of the world would not be allowed into the United States.

U-S Representative Mike Ross of Arkansas this week asked the F-D-A to temporarily ban the sale of basa catfish from Vietnam nationwide because of the health concerns. As of today, Arkansas had not banned the product.

The antibiotic at issue is not allowed in food in the United States, Canada and Europe out of concern that the germs the antibiotic fights would become resistant, making the antibiotic less effective when given to humans to fight infections.

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Testing and Tagging of Basa products escalates, with Florida now testing samples

SEAFOOD.COM NEWS by John Sackton -Aug 19, 2005- ? State officials in Florida have begun calling distributors, asking to test samples of Vietnamese basa for antibiotic residue. Florida now becomes the fourth state where local officials have begun tests.

In most cases, these officials are 'red tagging' product, meaning it cannot be sold until the results of lot tests are obtained.

In Louisiana, where the movement to ban basa sales started, officials are tagging all fish of Vietnamese origin. For example, a distributor reports that he was not allowed to sell tuna loins that were a product of Vietnam. Of course, wild tuna has no opportunity to be treated with antibiotics.

The ramifications of this war on basa continue to escalate. Under pressure from Southern congressmen, the FDA is now considering whether to impose a national ban on basa imports. It is unclear whether this will be in the form of an import alert, under which product must be tested, or a denial of entry of product.

The reaction to a simple test by a University of Mississippi researcher is turning into a disaster for the seafood industry. That test found students preferred the taste and texture of basa over farm raised catfish.

This result is no secret in the trade. The reason for the rapid acceptance of basa, by whatever name it is sold, is based on its product attributes, which include excellent texture, and a higher oil content than American catfish. The threat to the catfish industry from basa came not simply from price, but from the fact that many chefs preferred basa over other types of catfish.

Following the publication of the test results, local officials obtained and tested some of the basa used in the Univ. of Mississippi taste tests. This is when they found traces of a poultry antibiotic which the FDA has not authorized for use in aquaculture. That technical violation was all that was needed for the State of Louisiana to mount a campaign to seize and detain all Vietnamese products.

The prospect of FDA action resulting in a national ban would hurt more than basa importers, restaurants, and distributors. It would confirm again the notion that seafood, meaning all seafood, is contaminated with chemicals and drugs. The average consumer does not know the specifics of the problem. He or she just remembers seafood was banned because of antibiotics.

The string of stories about mercury in tuna, pcb's in salmon, the use of canthaxanthin for salmon coloring, vibrio in oysters, suspicion towards farmed fish, and now antibiotics in catfish all contribute to the perception that seafood is tainted.

In the past, it was environmental groups that were the driving force behind the public perception that seafood was tainted. In places such as British Columbia, opponents of farmed salmon have tried to deliberately scare the public as a tactic.

But now, it appears to be internal fights between seafood producers themselves that is pushing this issue forward. The campaign to support domestic wild shrimp has made no bones about its attacks on farmed shrimp. The catfish industry has been particularly virulent in attacking other catfish producers, particularly those in Vietnam. Some in the wild salmon industry have been attacking farmed salmon, quite successfully.

The net result is that seafood now carries an asterisk. Yes seafood is good for you, but read the fine print: it is also contaminated.

My guess is that there is a higher public concern, and avoidance of seafood because of these contaminants at present than there is of beef because of the presence of mad cow

syndrome.

Ocean Garden announces new traceability program for Mexican shrimp

SEAFOOD.COM NEWS [Ocean Garden Release] Aug 19, 2005- San Diego, CA ? August 18, 2005 ? Major seafood importer Ocean Garden Products has introduced a comprehensive product traceability program which provides a platform for the elimination of illegal fishing in the Sea of Cortez. In support of the landmark pact designed to protect the region's rich marine life, the quality control system utilizes a unique barcode and electronic database to track a shrimp's lifecycle from product origin, processing plant, lot and warehouse to truck/shipping method. As a result, seafood buyers can be sure that they are purchasing shrimp from a legal fishery whose practices comply with all U.S. and Mexican environmental regulations as well as the new provisions set forth in the historic sustainability agreement.

"Traceability is a significant step in making sure we are positive about where our product comes from," said John Filose, vice president of Ocean Garden, the largest importer of Authentic Mexican Shrimp into the U.S. "With our new system, it will be extremely difficult if not impossible for the illegal fishing trade to thrive."

Ocean Garden Products examined historical data, production and statistical information from more than 100 processing plants worldwide, HACCP (Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points system) data, and U.S. and Mexican food labeling regulations to establish its proprietary program. Initially inspired by a desire to provide its customers with improved food safety and food labeling information, the traceability program also evolved to meet the guidelines of the Federal Drug Administration's Bioterrorism Act.

Through a single barcode, Ocean Garden's quality control staff has instant access to product information, including Mexico as country of origin, processing plant, shrimp species (wild or farm-raised), brand, size, weight, color, production lot number, description (such as peeled and deveined tail-on), and UPC/retail code, which expedites inspection and evaluation processes. Quality control barcodes are created electronically and printed on stickers by plant staff who place the finished stickers on both inner packaging and master cases of shrimp. This barcode then allows personnel throughout the packaging, shipping and distribution process to track product lots as necessary.

"We are extremely proud of the new Ocean Garden traceability program which raises the bar for the entire shrimp industry in terms of product transparency," said Antonio Diaz, president and CEO of Ocean Garden. "Providing customers and end-users with the ability to trace a package of shrimp back to its producer and production plant makes our Mexican seal of authenticity that much more meaningful," he continued.

Ocean Garden has dedicated approximately 18 months of research and investigation to the development of its traceability program. By October 2005, 100 percent of Mexican

product imported by Ocean Garden into the U.S. will be traceable from processing plant to end-user.

In addition to its substantial investment in the new traceability platform, Ocean Garden has established a fund to jumpstart seed fundraising efforts for supporting sustainability and social fairness in the Sea of Cortez. Upon the signing of their accord, Ocean Garden and the Natural Resources Defense Council agreed to seek outside funds, such as government money and low-interest loans, to compensate local fishermen for elevated monitoring of the fisheries and more environmentally friendly fishing equipment.

Mexico assures shrimp fishermen they won't lose access in Sea of Cortez

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By Rosa María Méndez Fierros

MEXICALI, The designation of the Sea of Cortes' islands as a World Heritage site by the United Nations will not negatively affect fishing operations in the area, environmental authorities said this week.

In July, the U.N. Education, Science and Culture Organization (UNESCO) named as a world natural heritage site the spread of hundreds of islands and ecologically rich waters along the northwest coast of Mexico.

However, fishermen on the coasts of Sonora and Baja California objected to the UNESCO designation. They said that an enlarged protected area would hurt their economic activities, particularly shrimp harvesting, and estimated annual losses up to US40 million.

A proposal to increase the protected area for the vaquita porpoise from 900,000 to 1.2 million hectares in the same region also drew criticism from fishermen.

Ernesto Emkerlin, of the Environment Secretariat (Semarnat), assured that fishing would not be restricted. Instead, he explained, the intention is to create tools for greater sustainability and protection of fishing resources.

The UNESCO designation is simply a form of recognition of the 'invaluable natural patrimony of the area,' said Emkerlin in an interview.

'We've demonstrated statistically that since 1994, when the Gulf of California became a biological reserve, fishing profits have actually increased, in part due to the protection of

species during reproductive season,' said Emkerlin.

Despite claims by some fishing groups that environmentalists are more concerned with protecting animals than people, Emkerlin insists that this is false.

'Those fishermen who act responsibly and abide by the rules have nothing to fear. It is false that we are going to take away people's source of income,' he said. 'The protected areas were created to facilitate better alternatives, and will serve to protect not just marine wildlife, but also the fishermen themselves.'

'Our job is to assure that people are able to continue fishing in the long term. If we allow fishing to continue using harmful methods, in about seven years we will exhaust the supply of species to be fished.'

The category of protection awarded to the Gulf of California area by UNESCO is the lowest grade of conservation, according to the environmental group Greenpeace. The classification allows 'sustainable use of the ecosystem' including fishing activity.

'It is untrue that the vaquita porpoise's protected area blocks fishing,' added Juan Carlos Cantú, of Defenders of Wildlife in Mexico. 'Certain fishing techniques will be regulated within a very narrow area. With the right regulations, both environmental protection and fishing can coexist without negatively impacting either one.'