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Local fishermen distrust Costa Rican practices

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HOUMA -- U.S. official's word that wild shrimp caught and sold in Costa Rica is now deemed turtle-safe coincides with that nation's recent approval of the Central American Free Trade Agreement, some local fishermen say.

The U.S. determination has resulted in an embargo on the product being lifted.

Dean Falgout of Houma is more concerned about the effects of high-volume aquaculture products imported to the United States from China and Brazil than Costa Rica's tiny output. Falgout sold his trawler last year due to the low dock prices that have resulted from the cheap imports.

But having viewed the operations in Costa Rica firsthand, Falgout questions the honesty of U.S. assessments of Costa Rica's stated new belief in use of turtle-excluder devices. Those devices have long been required gear for shrimpers in the United States.

"They don't have no way of monitoring their vessels out at sea," said Falgout, who underwent a number of vessel inspections by the U.S. Coast Guard when he was shrimping.

Falgout and some other local fishermen say they have personal knowledge of Costa Rican boats leaving ports with turtle chutes in their trawls. But they are removed once the vessels are at sea, where boats remain for six months at a time, he said.

U.S. trade officials lifted embargoes against shrimp from Honduras, another CAFTA partner they say has taken a new interest in protecting turtles from getting drowned in trawls.

Nigeria is considered a nonturtle-safe country, so shrimp from there is still not allowed on U.S. shores.

"That's all hogwash," Falgout said of the Costa Rican blessing by the United States. "You can't tell me that country has changed in the last six or eight years."