

Mississippi catfish farmers say Vietnam is sinking their business

The millions of pounds of Vietnamese fish imported to the U.S. each year are not classified as 'catfish' and may not be subject to the same inspection regulations that will soon apply to the American fish.

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BELZONI, MISS., AND WASHINGTON — In Vietnam there's a kind of fish that's white-fleshed and whiskered and otherwise pretty darn catfish-like. But in the eyes of the U.S. government, the creatures aren't catfish.

Now fish farmers in the American South fear this government classification will allow the Vietnamese fish to slither around inspection regulations that will soon apply to American catfish.

It's one of many reasons fish farmer Scott Kiker is singing the catfish blues.

Kiker has been forced to shrink his dominion of teeming fish ponds in Mississippi from 270 acres a few years ago to about 80 acres. His operation, like the U.S. catfish industry overall, has been stung by the soaring cost of grain, as well as last year's spike in diesel prices. And the restaurant industry, like the broader economy, is slow enough to make a preacher cuss.

But there is one issue Kiker believes Washington can address: the millions of pounds of Vietnamese fish imported to the U.S. market each year, amounting to what he contends is unfair competition.

Southern catfish farmers believe that problem could be solved if the Obama administration expanded the government's definition of catfish to include the fish from Vietnam.

"They ought to have to do what we have to do. It's not fair," Kiker said.

Kiker, a friendly, ruddy-faced man with a pair of sunglasses perched on his head, recently gave a tour of his aluminum-walled hatchery, lined with troughs of gelatinous yellow eggs being aerated by small rotating paddles. It is a clean, simple operation -- one that his 12- and 16-year old daughters help run in the summer. It's also closely regulated, using only federally approved water additives and antibiotics.

"Our standards are so high, and they don't have any," Kiker said of the Vietnamese. "That's the bottom line."

That argument is ringing out from the farms of the American Southeast, where catfish -- once a river-dwelling delicacy whose availability was subject to the fisherman's luck -- has evolved since the 1960s into a reliable farmed product and a crucial cash crop.

Some observers in Washington warn that changing the definition of "catfish" may heighten tensions between the U.S. and Vietnam, and possibly ignite a trade war.

"This goes far beyond just the definition of a fish," said Gavin Gibbons of the National Fisheries Institute, a trade group.

The Vietnamese government notes that in 2002 Congress prohibited the Vietnamese species -- generally sold as basa and tra -- from being marketed here as catfish.

The 2002 legislation declared that no fish can be marketed as catfish "unless it is fish classified within the family ictaluridae," which is found in the South. The Vietnamese species come from the pangasiidae family.

The problem, from the Southern perspective: Butchers buy basa and tra and tell customers it's catfish. So do some restaurants. The fish industry has fought back with the help of sympathetic state legislatures: In August, Alabama will join a number of states that require restaurants to inform customers where their catfish comes from.

An issue at the federal level is a little-noticed provision of last year's farm bill that will soon subject catfish, whatever its origin, to a new, more rigorous inspection regimen. The provision was included after Chinese seafood was found in 2007 to include drugs banned in U.S. fish farming.

Critics of the push to reclassify say it amounts to protectionism. Supporters say it will increase food safety.

To the Vietnamese, it's confusing.

"The Vietnamese feel pretty whipsawed here," said Brenda A. Jacobs, a Washington trade lawyer who has advised the Vietnamese government. "They can't call their seafood 'catfish,' but they could be subject to a new inspection requirement that is applicable only to catfish?"

Does this reflect confusion, she asked, or an attempt to undermine fair competition?

Thoan V. Ngo, commercial counselor at the Vietnam Embassy in Washington, said he hoped the Americans "would see this as being less about just the definition of a fish and more about the definition of how the U.S. treats developing countries."

When asked about Vietnam's concerns, Rep. Rodney Alexander (R-La.), said, however, "I'm more concerned about my constituents than I am their constituents."

The specifics of this rather esoteric trade issue are well-known in Humphreys County, where Kiker has his ponds. This desktop-flat stretch of rich Mississippi Delta farmland once proudly produced more catfish than any other U.S. county. Not anymore.

The acres devoted to producing catfish in the county dropped from 29,650 acres in 2001 to 18,400 acres last year.

Though the industry is waning here, the ictaluridae family still holds a place of honor in the county seat of Belzoni, a town of 2,600 with a small catfish museum and brightly painted catfish sculptures that dot the downtown sidewalks.

Jim Steeby, a Belzoni-based aquaculture specialist for Mississippi State University, said that a bad batch of Vietnamese fish could give a bad name to Mississippi catfish -- and do even more harm to Humphreys County's signature industry.

"We have a reputation in this industry of having an immaculate product, and we don't want it tarnished," he said.

Steeby drove around the two-lane roads of the county, pointing out numerous swaths of land that once held shallow, nine-acre pools of fish -- and were now overrun with weeds or, in the best cases, sown with row crops.

The crops, he said, are not as labor intensive as catfish, another blow to employment in the region.

Steeby stopped at the home of catfish farmer Michael Pruden, 55, who was getting ready to transfer some fish from 160 acres that he was taking out of production.

Later, Pruden and his young daughter switched on an automated feeder to sprinkle his ponds with soy-corn pellets. The placid ponds erupted in splashes as hundreds of the primordial, wide-mouthed creatures rocketed to the surface for lunch.

Steeby said there would always be someone doing this work in a region where a plate of lightly breaded catfish ranks with pan-fried chicken as the mark of a worthy chef.

Pruden, a salty son of farmers in a John Deere ball cap, wasn't so sure.

"Unless it gets better," he said, "there's no future growing fish."