

U.S. catfish growers face growing competition from Asia

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They don't look too much like catfish. They don't taste like them, either — at least to catfish connoisseurs. But Vietnamese basa and tra fish often fool consumers in the U.S., where they're sometimes billed as Asian catfish. Sometimes they're even labeled Delta grown.

That's the Mekong Delta, not the Mississippi.

American-bred catfish — mostly farmed in the Southeast U.S. — dominate the world market, but the region's farmers are on the defensive against growing foreign competition of basa and tra, cheaper breeds that threaten U.S. catfish superiority.

Meeting recently in Atlanta to promote American-bred catfish, industry leaders voiced their frustration with how Chinese and Vietnamese farmers have been nibbling away at their customers with prices that are between 50 cents and a dollar per pound cheaper.

While the federal government predicts that 560 million pounds (252 million kilograms) of American farm-raised catfish will be processed this year, a drop of 15 percent from three years ago, foreign rivals are making up ground.

More than 24 million pounds (10.8 million kilograms) of Vietnamese basa and tra have been shipped to the U.S. this year, doubling last year's total. And catfish imports from China have almost tripled, rising to 4.1 million pounds (1.8 million kilograms) of frozen fillets, according to the National Marine Fisheries Service.

"It's been increasing," said Jimmy Avery, a Mississippi State University professor who leads the National Warmwater Aquaculture Center in Stoneville, Mississippi. "And that trend is troubling."

Another spike looms if the U.S. agrees to a pact that would permanently normalize trade relations with Vietnam, which President George W. Bush discussed this week with Vietnamese executives during an eight-day trip to Asia. Although the two countries have a bilateral trade agreement, American companies cannot take full advantage of Vietnam's entry into the World Trade Organization unless the trade bill passes.

The agreement along with Vietnam's entry into the WTO would require the country to slash tariffs and trade barriers, making it easier for foreign companies to enter its market while opening up export opportunities for Vietnamese companies.

The plan is expected to pass Congress, although The Catfish Institute, a Jackson, Mississippi-based group, has tried to stave off a deal by questioning the presence of banned chemicals in the foreign fish.

"While Asian seafood imports are growing rapidly, federal inspections and testing of this food remains inadequate, at best," said Roger Barlow, the institute's president, who is trying to build a "catfish caucus" in Congress to support his cause.

Catfish farmers have fought back before to protect their share of the nation's top aquaculture product, a resilient fish that spawns easily and can survive fairly drastic temperature swings.

Unfair trade complaints in 2003 led to antidumping restrictions that cut in half the number of basa and tra imports. The same year, Congress passed a law preventing the Vietnamese basa from being labeled "catfish."

More recently, Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama — where most catfish are farmed — have issued alerts that call for strict inspection of some catfish imports after antibiotics showed up in some samples. And a federal law passed that requires sellers to slap "made in" stickers that show where fish are caught.

To environmentalists, who consider catfish among the greenest of seafoods, the foreign surge is a cause for concern.

"Where we go as a globe in terms of dealing with these issues will be driven by what's happening in China," said George Leonard, a scientist with the Seafood Watch program at Monterey Bay Aquarium in California.

While Vietnamese breeds are often trapped in net-pen systems that can tax natural resources, the U.S. fish are raised in closed ponds that reduce the risk of spreading disease and have a minimal environmental impact, Leonard said.

"We need to work at what we do here so U.S. practices can be models," he said during a catfish conference held in September at — where else — the Georgia Aquarium.

The Vietnam Association of Seafood Exporters and Producers would not return messages for comment on this story, but its president, Ho Quoc Luc, has said his country has been working to meet seafood safety standards.

Many seafood eaters can't tell the difference between the types of fish. Both are white meats with a relatively mild flavor and look enough alike, at least splayed out on a plate. To experts, though, there's no comparison.

Steve Martin, a catfish devotee from Indianapolis, set up a Web site devoted to American-bred catfish after a run-in with the Vietnamese kind at a disappointing catfish festival in Indiana.

"I just knew it didn't look right. The fried fillets didn't look right and they were really thin," he said, a tinge of disgust in his voice.

"When you hear catfish, you think it's U.S. But they were being served catfish from some dirty river in Vietnam. That was a real eye-opener."

Catfish Institute: <http://www.catfishinstitute.com>

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