

USDA not budging on smoke-treated Vietnamese fish

By [Jason Huffman](#) Jan. 17, 2018 15:30 GMT



Raw fillets of swai fish. Photo courtesy of Chefs-Resources.com

The US Department of Agriculture’s Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) won’t be allowing any pangasius from Vietnam that’s been treated with “tasteless smoke” into the country any time soon.

FSIS officials on Tuesday confirmed to *Undercurrent News* that they [rejected entry](#) of a container of 39,000 pounds of frozen “smoked swai fillets” from Vietnam that was brought to the Port of Los Angeles, California, on Dec. 19. Their decision, they said, was largely based on the fish being labeled as having been treated with the mixture of chemicals and gasses that include carbon monoxide and are used to preserve a meat’s color, texture and taste.



US detains Vietnamese pangasius over use of tasteless smoke

Swai is a member of the pangasius family, and is native to southeast Asia. Also known as “iridescent shark,” though it isn’t a shark, swai comes with meat that is flaky and white and often bought as a less expensive alternative to domestic catfish. All are in the siluriformes family.

Until the tasteless smoke treatment is identified on the agency’s 126-page list of [“safe and suitable” ingredients](#), FSIS said it will continue to stop such imports, and that won’t happen until the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) grants “generally recognized as safe” status, or GRAS, to the use of tasteless smoke on siluriformes.

Siluriformes are the only fish over which the FSIS maintains food safety authority, and the responsibility is new.

Congress transferred the authority from the FDA to FSIS in the 2008 farm bill. Due in large part to a political fight that delayed action and required additional legislative moves, FSIS began conducting inspections in September 2017.

Swai importer has 45 days to respond

Ben England, the founder and CEO of FDA Imports, a Baltimore, Maryland-based food import consulting agency, told *Undercurrent* earlier this week that at least [three shipments of pangasius](#) were held up by FSIS because of tasteless smoke. Regulatory officials explained that their actions against one container may have caused the importer to withdraw other shipments.

“At this time, FSIS has not rejected any additional product for this reason,” the agency clarified.

The swai importer has 45 days to correct the problem, destroy the product or remove its shipment, FSIS officials said.

As reported earlier, tasteless smoke has been deemed as safe for use by FSIS on beef, pork and poultry, and the FDA gave a favorable GRAS notice for its use on tuna back in 2000.

“There’s no average time for FDA to respond to a new GRAS petition,” England told *Undercurrent* Tuesday. “It depends on how complex the issue is and how well prepared the notification is.”

It took FDA 13 months for it to give its favorable opinion on tuna, for example.

One bright spot for the importer of frozen swai is that the product has a shelf life of two years, an FSIS official told *Undercurrent*. So there is a chance the matter might be settled while the fish can still be sold.

In the meantime, US importers of swai, pangasius or catfish will be forced to avoid any product that’s been treated with tasteless smoke.

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