

US detains Vietnamese pangasius over use of tasteless smoke

By [Jason Huffman](#) Jan. 16, 2018 17:27 GMT



Pangasius. Credit: Hung Vuong Corporation

Pangasius, the Asian fish that closely resembles and competes against American catfish, has run into its first major snag since the US switched which food regulatory agency is charged with guaranteeing its safety. Three and maybe four shipments of pangasius from Vietnam have been held up at US ports in roughly the past week by the Department of Agriculture's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) over concerns that "tasteless smoke" -- the industry term for a treatment mix that includes carbon monoxide -- was identified on the label as an ingredient, Ben England, a former US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) official, told *Undercurrent News*.

FSIS' action likely relates to its release of a [126-page directive](#) in late December that updates a list of "safe and suitable ingredients used in the production of meat, poultry and egg products," said England. Because the use of tasteless smoke on pangasius is not on that list, FSIS inspectors are no doubt under the impression that it's not acceptable, he explained.

England, whose Baltimore, Maryland, consulting firm, FDA Imports, specializes in addressing regulatory concerns related to the import of food and beverages, and maintains more than 100 Asian seafood importers as clients, said his office has reached out to both FSIS and FDA in hopes of reaching a resolution.

A FSIS spokesperson told *Undercurrent* that the agency was looking to provide a comment on the matter, but was not able to respond before publication of this article.

In the meantime, England has warned his clients via [a blog](#): “We expect there to be an increase in Customs rejection of entries in the near future for all those shipments that are being transported by shipping lines.”

Don't call it 'fresh frozen'

Though the ingestion of carbon monoxide as a gas can be lethal to humans, its use in the treatment of meat, including seafood, is not dangerous, England assured. It's been used for years on beef, pork and poultry to preserve color for years and is listed for that purpose on FSIS' safe and suitable list.

In 2000, [FDA identified tasteless smoke as "generally recognized as safe"](#), or GRAS, for its use on tuna.

FDA quotes the explanation of how tasteless smoke works provided by Hawaii International, the company that submitted the GRAS request, in its response. The company said it was seeking to use the treatment “on raw seafood, before it is frozen, to preserve the taste, aroma, texture and color of the frozen seafood,” according to the agency.

“... [T]asteless smoke is generated by burning organic, food grade smoking material at a temperature below 850 [degrees Fahrenheit] in a smoke generator and then processing the resulting smoke through a filter that removes the particulate matter and the taste components from the vapor phase of the smoke,” the FDA said the company explained. “The primary components of tasteless smoke are nitrogen, oxygen, carbon monoxide, carbon dioxide, and methane. In addition, tasteless smoke contains trace levels of various phenols and hydrocarbons.”

FDA clarified in its GRAS notice that a seafood product that uses tasteless smoke can no longer be referred to as “fresh frozen.”

Not expected

FSIS began wielding its new authority over pangasius and other siluriformes, the genus that also includes domestic catfish, in September 2017, following a nearly decade-long battle that started with a change to the farm bill. The move, which was initially championed by senator Thad Cochran, a Missouri Republican, in 2008, was seen as a gift to the domestic catfish industry, which had lost much of its market share to the cheaper imports. It was fought by the National Fisheries Institute, the US seafood industry’s national trade association.

Catfish remains the one fish species regulated by FSIS instead of FDA, and England expects more snags like the one recently experienced as the agency adapts to its new role.

“Under USDA jurisdiction, you can’t import anything from another country unless USDA has deemed that country’s whole food safety regime as equivalent,” England said. “And of course that is going to take a while.

And so everybody was sort of assuming that FDA and FSIS are still going to work together ... They are going to use seafood import programs and, in part, some of the prior FDA import alerts to inform FSIS as to what to look out for. But this, I don't think, was expected.”

Pangasius imports down 17%

Based on data from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the US was on pace last year to see a 17% reduction in its imports of pangasius, which NOAA identifies under the blanket term of “catfish.” During the first 11 months, 103,525 tons of catfish, worth \$353.6 million, came into the country, primarily from Vietnam. In 2016, the US imported 136,816 metric tons of catfish, worth \$405.6m, again mostly from Vietnam.

A short supply of Vietnamese pangasius in the US and also in the European Union has **boosted the overall price** of the fish in recent times. Sources reported prices ranging between \$2.80 per kilogram to \$3.20/kg.

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