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U.S. Shrimpers: Customs and Border Protection Can Help FDA Improve Food Safety

Tarpon Springs, FL—The Southern Shrimp Alliance (SSA) testified yesterday before the House Ways and Means Subcommittee on Oversight and Subcommittee on Trade that the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) lags behind the European Union (EU), Japan, and Canada, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) in food safety enforcement. In an effort to raise U.S. seafood safety to international norms, the Southern Shrimp Alliance (SSA) encouraged reforms that would allow U.S. Customs and Border Protection (Customs) to play a greater role in food safety enforcement.

For nearly a decade, FDA has relied heavily on U.S. importers to protect our food supply. Based on importer certification that products comply with the food safety standards, FDA inspects only one percent of imported seafood products as the first and last line of defense.

As noted by multiple government reports, FDA's system is not working. For example, every major market—except for the United States—has found repeated shipments of Vietnamese shrimp contaminated with banned antibiotics. U.S. importers purchase seafood from the same Vietnamese exporters that have had seafood products rejected by Japan and Canada for illegal antibiotics, pesticides, and other food safety violations. Yet, FDA has not reported refusing a single shipment of Vietnamese shrimp for the presence of antibiotics for at least the past year.

“The U.S. is a magnet for unsafe shrimp imports because FDA has a completely inadequate food safety regime and other major markets strongly enforce their food safety laws,” explained John Williams, executive director of the SSA. “USDA's regulations for imported meat, poultry, and egg products are on par with food safety enforcement in other major markets. But the safety of imported seafood has been neglected.”

Customs can and should play an important role in ensuring the safety of imported seafood. If FDA required equivalency agreements like USDA and other major seafood importing countries, then Customs would have the ability to determine whether a product was shipped from an approved exporter located in an approved country.

In addition, Customs should be given the authority to quarantine imports based on the level of food-safety risk presented by the shipment. Once quarantined, imported products that are found to violate U.S. food safety standards should either be destroyed by Customs or, in limited circumstances, re-dispatched after being marked by Customs with the words “United States Refused Entry.”

“Seafood importers have fought tooth and nail to prevent improvement of the regulation of the safety of seafood imports. These importers are more interested in minimizing their costs than protecting consumers,” said Williams.

For example, while the National Fisheries Institute in its representation of U.S. seafood importers testified yesterday that FDA should “shine a spotlight on those not adhering to our requirements,” the organization previously has opposed efforts to prevent the port shopping of rejected products by arguing that seafood imports found to be contaminated should be marked with nothing more than “invisible ink.”

“The EU, Japan, and Canada as well as our own USDA demonstrate that stringent import systems can protect food supplies while facilitating trade in safe products,” said Williams. “We look forward to working with our elected officials to reach parity with international food safety enforcement standards.”

SSA is an alliance of the U.S. warmwater wild shrimp fishery from eight states: North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana and Texas. For more information on the SSA, please visit www.shrimpalliance.com.

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Editor’s Note: A copy of SSA testimony to the Ways and Means Subcommittee on Oversight and Subcommittee on Trade can be found at on the home page of SSA’s Web Site under “Congressional Testimony.”