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## **Voluntary Food Labeling is Not COOL**

*WASHINGTON, DC* – The Southern Shrimp Alliance denounced legislation introduced by U.S. Reps. Bob Goodlatte, R-Va., and Charles Stenholm, D-Texas, as an attempt to kill the country-of-origin labeling (COOL) law passed as part of the 2002 farm bill. The Goodlatte-Stenholm legislation would repeal the mandatory labeling provision and, instead, maintain a voluntary system.

"Companies have had the ability to voluntarily label their products since the mid-1990s," said Eddie Gordon, President of the Southern Shrimp Alliance (SSA). "Packers, processors and retailers have refused to participate in the current USDA voluntary labeling program despite an overwhelming majority of consumers wanting the information."

Mandatory country of origin labeling is necessary to give American shrimpers the ability to create a separate market for domestic shrimp. Over the past several years, the American market has been inundated with a flood of pond-raised shrimp from foreign nations, much of which is being investigated for trade violations. Despite lip-service from the American Seafood Distributors Association, most retailers have failed to help the domestic shrimp industry distinguish their products to consumers. The U.S. shrimp industry has prepared a marketing program to create a niche market for wild American shrimp which relies on COOL.

"Many customers prefer to purchase wild shrimp harvested in the United States because of the distinct taste, quality, and texture, among other benefits, of a fresh, wild caught product," Gordon continued. "The success of this marketing effort depends on the ability of consumers to know the origin of the shrimp they are purchasing."

"Also, consumer watchdog groups are actively raising consumer awareness of the health concerns associated with imported, farm-raised shrimp. Wild American Shrimp is a very healthy food, and it is unfair to deny U.S. producers the right to have our products easily and consistently distinguished to consumers," explained Gordon. "Mandatory country of origin labeling is critical because it provides consumers with the information necessary to discern between U.S. and imported shrimp products and to make a knowing and intelligent purchase."

Instead of scrapping the mandatory COOL law, Gordon suggested actions to improve it. Reps. Collin Peterson, D-Minn., and Dennis Rehberg, R-Mont., have introduced the Country-of-Origin Labeling Amendment Act of 2003 (HR 3083), and Reps. Mary Bono, R-Calif., and Darlene Hooley, D-Ore., have introduced the Country-of-Origin Labeling Enhancement Act of 2004 (HR 3993).

"These legislators have offered constructive solutions to address the concerns surrounding COOL, quite a contrast to the negative approach of killing the law before it is properly implemented," Gordon said. "If USDA uses common sense in writing the implementation rules, COOL could be up and running by the September 2004 deadline for seafood."

SSA is an alliance of the U.S. warm water wild shrimp fishery from eight states: North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas.