BARNEY FRANK
4TH DISTRICT, MASSACHUSETTS

2252 RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING
WASHINGTON, DC 20515–2104
(202) 225–5931

29 CRAFTS STREET
SUITE 375
NEWTON, MA 02458
(617) 332–3920

# Congress of the United States
# House of Representatives
## Washington, DC

558 PLEASANT STREET
ROOM 309
NEW BEDFORD, MA 02740
(508) 999–6462

THE JONES BUILDING
29 BROADWAY
SUITE 310
TAUNTON, MA 02780
(508) 822–4796

April 2, 2009

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

I am writing to express my opposition to potential changes in the definition of "catfish" that would have the effect of expanding the categories of fish that are included within the USDA imported catfish inspection program.

As you are aware, the 2008 Farm Bill included language calling on the Department to define "catfish." It is my understanding that consideration is being given within the Department to the idea of expanding the definition so as to include species in the *pangasius* family or genus, as well as those in the *ictalurus* group. Regardless of whether one looks at the family or genus level, this would still involve excessively broadening the specific species included under the rubric "catfish." This is not merely a scientific dispute; expanding the definition has the potential to cause economic harm among Massachusetts companies that process imported seafood.

If the definition is expanded, *pangasius* fish would be subject to the USDA inspection requirements, which would mean that the inspection would have to take place in the country of origin. In this case, that would likely mean Vietnam or other nations in East Asia, where *pangasius* species such as basa and swai are prevalent. The problem is that all indications are that it would not be possible at present for these countries to meet the current USDA inspection standards, which would in turn end the ability of U.S. processors to import any of these fish.

I believe it would be a serious mistake to impose this kind of negative economic burden, with the likelihood of significant job losses, on U.S. companies. There has been no showing that importing basa or other *pangasius* fish poses a safety risk that requires either the implementation of the stringent USDA inspection regime or the effective shutdown of these imports. I urge you not to expand the definition of catfish to go beyond the current, commonly understood definition of the term, which is focused on *ictalurus* or channel catfish.

Thank you for your attention to this matter. I look forward to your response.

Barney Frank
BARNEY FRANK

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