



# Wild American Catfish Coalition

MIKE HUTT

# Challenge

- ▶ In 2008, Congress included language in the Farm Bill to transfer catfish inspection authority from the primary federal seafood safety agency, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) which is responsible for inspection of farmed meat, poultry and eggs. This move, spearheaded by Senator Thad Cochran (R-MS), a senior member of the Senate Agriculture and Appropriations Committees, received broad support from the U.S. catfish farming community in part because the rigors and expense of complying with the USDA Meat Inspection Act would serve as a barrier to the importation of foreign catfish which was competing against farmed, US product. Under USDA inspection rules, both U.S. and foreign products must undergo equivalent inspections.

# Status

- ▶ Since passage of the 2008 Farm Bill, the USDA has worked to finalize the rules governing the new Catfish Inspection Program. The rules are scheduled for full implementation on September 1, 2017. Attempts by Congress and the broader U.S. seafood supply chain, including restaurants, distributors, retailers, to repeal the USDA catfish program were ultimately defeated in December, 2017 and it is understood that another attempt to repeal the entire rule will not be undertaken.

# Wild American Catfish: An Unintended Impact

- ▶ Throughout the 10-year “catfish wars” as they became known, little attention was paid to a relatively new industry: **Wild** American Catfish. Growth of a commercial-scale wild American catfish industry is being made possible by an explosion of Blue Catfish in the Chesapeake Bay watershed and other waterways across the Eastern U.S. Hundreds of small fishing companies, independent fishermen and seafood processors are successfully commercializing wild catfish and have created new markets for the product. Distributors, retailers, chefs, and consumers are increasingly demanding wild, domestic seafood, and catfish is no different. Unfortunately, the expense and regulatory hurdles associated with the new USDA catfish inspections are putting this new industry and the fishermen who depend on it in jeopardy.

# Wild American Catfish Coalition Formed

- ▶ In July, 2017, U.S. based harvesters, processors, distributors and private citizens came together to form the Wild American Catfish Coalition, an advocacy organization with a mission of preserving accessibility, affordability and responsible management of **wild-caught American catfish**. The Coalition is actively working to identify administrative and legislative solutions that will provide regulatory relief to the Wild American Catfish community. The coalition is recruiting supporters from across the seafood supply chain and is actively sharing stories of the impacted businesses with federal policymakers while concurrently seeking mechanisms for immediate relief.

# What State Policymakers can do?

- ▶ The Wild American Catfish Coalition urges state policymakers to send letters to the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Purdue asking for immediate regulatory relief for the U.S. wild catfish industry. A short term “fix” may take the form of a 6-month delay in final implementation. A more comprehensive “fix” would be to exempt U.S. wild catfish from the entire program.

# Participate in the Wild American Catfish Coalition

- ▶ Designees from state natural resource agencies are encouraged to participate in the Wild American Catfish Coalition as it works to provide this growing industry with regulatory relief. Almost everyone agrees that the intent of Congress was NOT to put Americans out of work. The Wild American Catfish Coalition will build consensus on the issue and develop the most effective solution for impacted seafood businesses across America.

# Impact

- ▶ This new regulation means an FDA inspector needs to be on site when processing is being done. If you're processing outside of 8-5 or nights and weekends you have to pay a \$70.00 per hour inspection fee. This has caused processors not to be able to purchase fish that they would usually purchase because of having to pay overtime to process.
- ▶ This new legislation is negatively impacting the wild blue catfish harvesters and processors. In Virginia we have processors who have stopped processing Wild Blue Catfish which is depleting the harvesters market for the species.