



Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP): Fast Track to a Rising Tide of Imported Fish

Fact Sheet • April 2014

The Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) has been called the most important trade deal that no one has heard about, but it could significantly harm American seafood consumers as well as the fishing and fish farming industries. The TPP will likely increase imports of potentially unsafe and minimally inspected fish and seafood products, potentially exposing consumers to more and more dangerous seafood.

The TPP also undermines independent, family-owned fishing businesses that are the economic engine of coastal communities. These small fishing businesses already face a flood of imported fish products that threaten their livelihoods, and the TPP will likely turn that flood into a surging wave of seafood imports. In some cases, the fish are imported from TPP countries at unfairly and artificially reduced prices that make it even harder for American fishing and fish farming firms to stay in business.¹

The TPP is a 12-nation trade deal that is being negotiated behind closed doors and that includes some of the world's biggest fish and seafood exporters (Vietnam, Malaysia, Canada, Mexico).² The TPP is designed to allow other Pacific Rim nations to join the trade deal in the future.³ Already, China, Indonesia, the Philippines, South Korea, and Thailand (and their tremendous fishing and aquaculture industries) are rumored to be interested in joining the TPP.⁴

The goal of the TPP is to eliminate trade barriers, including U.S. tariffs on fish imports (a tax levied on imports) and non-tariff barriers that could include U.S. labeling or food safety oversight.⁵ This could eliminate small duties on nearly 80 kinds of fisheries products that would increase the flow of imported fish and seafood into the United States.⁶ The TPP negotiations are also trying to facilitate “regulatory coherence” and to make it more difficult to establish food safety standards and increased oversight.⁷ This move is designed to accelerate the flow of fish (and other foods and products) over the U.S. border with less regulatory oversight, potentially exposing consumers to unsafe fish and seafood products.

Fish and Seafood TPP Imports Already Growing, Will Accelerate After Trade Deal

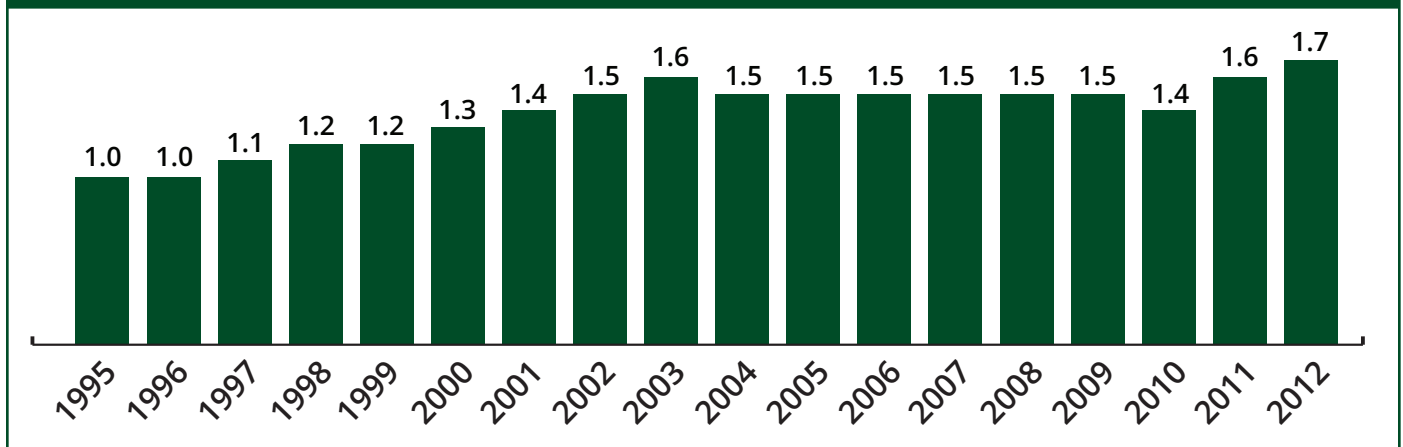
Over the past dozen years, total fish and seafood imports from TPP nations have grown by a third, rising from 1.3 billion pounds in 2000 to 1.7 billion pounds in 2012.⁸ (See Figure 1 on page 2.) Free trade deals and global trade pacts tend to increase fish and seafood imports. Total U.S. fish imports increased nearly twice as fast in the 15 years after the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and World Trade Organization went into effect than in the 15 years prior to these developments.⁹ Currently, more than 9 out of 10 fish that Americans eat are imported and about half of all imported fish and seafood were raised on fish farms.¹⁰ In 2012, about one-third of all fish and seafood imports came from TPP countries.¹¹

The Dubious Safety of Minimally Inspected Imported Seafood

U.S. border inspection has already failed to keep pace with rising imports, and the TPP will only increase the volume of uninspected seafood imports. In 2011, there were about 90 federal seafood inspectors assigned to examine 5.2 billion total pounds of imported fish and seafood.¹² Each inspector looks at some 58 million pounds of imported seafood a year — or about a quarter million pounds of imported fish every workday.¹³ As a result, very few shipments of fish are inspected at the border. About 2 percent of imported fish and seafood shipments is physically inspected or tested in laboratories.¹⁴

The low level of inspection leaves consumers vulnerable to foodborne illnesses and to exposure to common chemicals and

Figure 1: TPP Fish and Seafood Imports (in billions of pounds)



SOURCE: Food & Water Watch analysis of USDA FAS data.

drugs used in overseas aquaculture operations that are illegal in the United States. In 2012, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that imported fish were the most common source of foodborne illness outbreaks from imported foods between 2005 and 2010.¹⁵

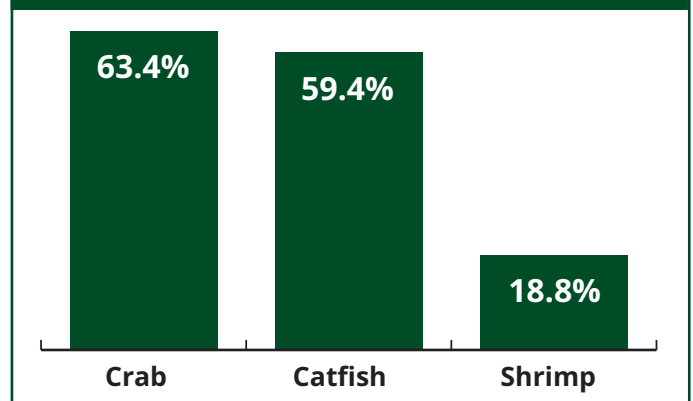
Many of the TPP countries produce farmed seafood that can be raised with chemicals and antibiotics that are prohibited in the United States. Four TPP countries (Vietnam, Japan, Chile and Malaysia) are top 20 global aquaculture powers that produced a combined 9.8 billion pounds of farm-raised fish in 2010.¹⁶ In the developing world, fish farmers use veterinary drugs and fungicides that are unapproved in the United States in order to combat disease in overcrowded fish pens. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is increasingly concerned that U.S. fish imports contain residues of these drugs and chemicals, which can cause cancer and allergic reactions and contribute to antibiotic-resistant bacteria.¹⁷ A 2013 survey found that 100 percent of Vietnamese catfish farms used antibiotics that were unapproved in the United States.¹⁸

Federal inspectors don't examine enough imports to find these unapproved and dangerous chemicals on imported fish. The European Union found four times more veterinary drug violations on imported seafood annually than the United States because the EU inspected 20–50 percent of imports, compared to less than 2 percent in the United States.¹⁹

When U.S. inspectors do examine aquaculture imports, they can find significant problems. For example, the FDA banned 14 Malaysian shrimp exporters and 14 Vietnamese crab exporters for using unapproved veterinary drugs that posed human health risks.²⁰ Consumers can easily be exposed to these risks because TPP imports already can be a considerable portion of many commonly eaten fish and seafood products. In 2012, about one out of five shrimp (18.8 percent), three out of five crabs (63.4 percent) and three out of five catfish (59.4 percent) that Americans eat came from TPP countries.²¹ (See Figure 2.)

Further, trade deals like the TPP aim to “harmonize” and create “regulatory coherence” for food safety protections, which

Figure 2: TPP Import Share of U.S. Consumption



SOURCE: Food & Water Watch analysis of USDA FAS, NMFS consumption, National Fisheries Institute data.

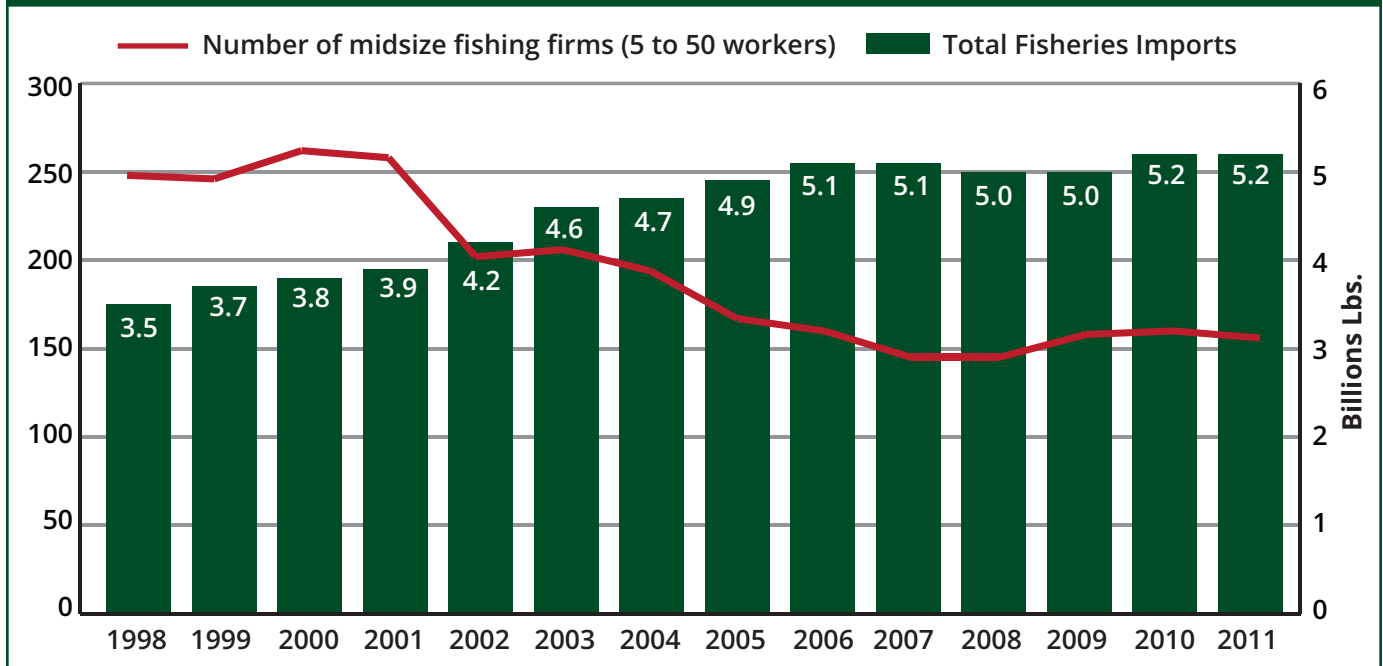
is just free trade jargon that can weaken food safety oversight of imported fish. The TPP food safety negotiations remain shrouded in secrecy, but food companies are asking that the TPP include special provisions to challenge the decisions of border inspectors to examine and perform laboratory tests on potentially risky imports.²² This could make it harder to prevent aquaculture fish imports that may contain dangerous drugs or chemicals from entering the food supply.

The TPP Will Further Harm Independent Fishing and Fish Farming Businesses

The current wave of imported fish and seafood products — often artificially low-priced, often produced under unsanitary conditions — competes with independent American fishing businesses and fish farms. Domestic fish and seafood producers are especially worried about the safety of imports that are not produced under the same environmental and health standards,²³ because risky imports turn consumers off fish altogether when people learn of the risks.²⁴

As the volume of fish imports has risen, the number of U.S. fishing businesses has declined. Between 2002 and 2011, the total volume of fish and seafood imports grew by 23.7 percent

Figure 3: U.S. Fish Imports and Midsize Fishing Businesses



SOURCE: Food & Water Watch analysis of U.S. Census Bureau County Business Patterns and USDA FAS data.

and the number of midsize fishing businesses fell by 22.7 percent.²⁵ (See Figure 3.) As the number of fishing companies slid, the U.S. seafood processing industry lost 134 plants and shed 7,400 jobs over the same decade.²⁶ The U.S. Department of Agriculture has certified that nearly 10,000 lobstermen, shrimpers and catfish farmers have been harmed by rising imports and qualified for federal support.²⁷ The TPP will have an especially devastating impact on shrimpers and catfish farms.

Imported catfish catastrophe

America's catfish farmers have been slammed by low-priced catfish imports, potentially tainted with illegal chemicals and drugs, especially from TPP nation Vietnam. Prior to 1999, imported catfish accounted for less than 1 percent of U.S. consumption.²⁸ Over a dozen years, catfish imports from Vietnam increased more than 30-fold, rising from 7 million pounds in 2000 to 228 million pounds in 2012.²⁹ The price of imported catfish was less than half that of American catfish in 2013, and lower-priced imports have reduced the price that U.S. catfish farmers receive.³⁰ In 2013, the federal government reaffirmed that Vietnamese catfish were sold at unfair and artificially low prices, which harmed U.S. catfish farmers.³¹ Over the past decade, more than half the catfish farms and production have evaporated and an estimated 22,000 catfish industry jobs have disappeared.³²

Surging shrimp imports

Over the past dozen years, shrimp imports from TPP countries (mostly Vietnam and Malaysia) rose by 80 percent, from 125 million pounds in 2000 to 224 million pounds in 2012.³³ In 2011, the federal government determined that the large and growing volume of Asian shrimp imports has significantly un-

dermined the prices that U.S. shrimpers receive, reduced the shrimper and shrimp processor operating revenue and lowered the number of workers in the U.S. shrimp industry.³⁴ The U.S. shrimp industry largely harvests wild-caught shrimp,³⁵ but four out of five shrimp that consumers eat are imported from countries where shrimp is raised in ponds using antibiotics and chemicals.³⁶ Between 2000 and 2012, U.S. commercial shrimp landings dropped by 30 million pounds and \$200 million, eroding about a third of the value of the shrimp catch in a dozen years.³⁷

Protect Consumers and Independent Fishing and Fish Farm Businesses: Stop Fast Track

Congress is considering giving "fast track" authority to the White House to accelerate passage of the Trans-Pacific Partnership and to open up the United States to more unsafe, imported fish and seafood products. The impact on food safety and on independent fishing and fish farm businesses is just one ugly chapter in a book of free trade horrors. But under fast track, Congress can only vote trade deals like the TPP up or down. Congress could not ensure that the United States would not accept fish produced with dangerous and illegal drugs and chemicals, ensure that 10 percent of imported seafood is inspected, prevent unfairly low-priced and illegally subsidized fish imports or even prevent TPP nations from secretly transshipping fish produced in China or other countries.

Ask your Representative and Senators to oppose fast track. To take action, visit:

<http://www.foodandwaterwatch.org/global/global-trade/tpp-and-tafta-free-trade-with-a-high-price>.

Endnotes

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