



What Will it Take to Kill the Farm Bill's Wasteful Catfish Subsidy?

Mark Hemingway

January 28, 2014 4:41 PM

A provision tucked away in a 2008 bill allocated \$20 million to create an office at the USDA to inspect facilities that process catfish. Seafood inspections have traditionally been done by the Food and Drug Administration—and if you're wondering why one species of fish needs to be inspected by two different federal agencies, so are a lot of people in Washington.

The USDA's catfish office has a staff of four full-time employees. The catfish office needs about \$14 million annually to operate. It has yet to inspect a single catfish.

Indeed, the catfish program appears to be a protectionist racket and a waste of taxpayer money. But no one can get rid of it. In 2012, the Senate voted by voice vote to eliminate the program. In 2013, the House Agriculture Committee voted 31-15 to eliminate the program. On at least three different occasions, the [Government Accountability Office has singled out the program as wasteful and unnecessary](#). And Vietnam is threatening to scuttle a major trade deal because, in addition to being wasteful, the bill is a protectionist racket. "It's clearly a thinly veiled attempt designed to keep out fish from countries like Vietnam," Le Chi Dzung, an economist at the Vietnam embassy, [told *The New York Times*](#).

So why is the USDA catfish office still around? As I noted last November:

The retired chief of the FDA's Seafood Processing and Technology Policy Branch [observed](#), "The inspiration for this rush to spend \$30 million (to start) of hard earned taxpayer dollars on a non-existent problem is a group of lobbyists and a trade association representing elements of the American catfish producers." Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) and Sen. Jeanne Shaheen (D-N.H.) were behind an effort to kill the attempt to duplicate catfish inspection at the USDA earlier this year. "But despite our repeated requests, the Chair and Ranking Member of the Agriculture Committee, Sens. Debbie Stabenow (D-Mich.) and Thad Cochran (R-Miss.), have chosen to block a vote," McCain lamented. It will not be surprising to learn that catfish farming is a big concern in Cochran's home state.

Well, a new version of the bill was just unveiled, and—surprise!— funding for the USDA catfish program is still in the bill. Compared to previous versions of the legislation, there have been some changes to the catfish subsidy amendment allegedly to address concerns raised about the bill. But the bill still requires seafood producers, which often process other kinds of fish in addition to catfish, to submit to duplicative and unnecessary regulatory oversight. Trade experts still say the bill will aggravate other catfish producers that the U.S. has trade agreements with. And it's still going to cost taxpayers millions of dollars every year in perpetuity.

Despite all of this, the *New York Times* [reported yesterday](#) that the final version of the farm bill "is expected to keep a controversial catfish-inspection office at the Agriculture Department."

If you want to know what's wrong with Washington, the catfish subsidy is a textbook example. Even when there's near widespread consensus between Republicans, Democrats, and federal agencies that something is a terrible idea, two senators and one motivated lobby can still find a way to force it on taxpayers.