

## Know Your Catfish and Label It Properly

By **Dr. Evelyn Watts**, Assistant Professor/Seafood Extension Specialist, and  
**Thomas Hymel**, Marine Extension Agent, LSU AgCenter and Louisiana Sea Grant

Only those catfish species historically harvested from the wild or raised in aquaculture systems in the U.S. can legally be sold or listed on restaurant menus as catfish. Recently, three Louisiana restaurant managers were cited by the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries for selling an imported fish species as catfish. Many consumers, food service providers and distributors are not fully aware of the regulations over proper naming of catfish. This issue of substituting other fish species for domestic catfish has been a problem for quite a while. Regulations were established in Louisiana to guard against this practice as early as 1996 (Illustration 1). On top of that, federal regulations went into effect in 2015 (Illustration 2).

### Background

Fish with common names including Swai, Basa, and others, have some similarities to catfish, but are subtly different in taste and texture when cooked. These fish genetically are quite different and cannot be sold in U.S. market as catfish. Most catfish-like species are included in the order *Siluriformes* which includes several different families of fish. Louisiana catfish is of the families *Ictaluridae*, *Ariidae*, and *Loricariidae* which include channel, blue, flathead, gaftop, and hardhead catfishes. Swai, Basa, and the other common imports are of the families *Pangasiidae* and *Clariidae* (Illustration 3). In many cases, Swai, Basa, and others are foreign-raised and cheaper, but are actually a very different product. To be clear, it's not illegal to sell Swai and Basa in Louisiana, but it is illegal to sell them as catfish.



Channel Catfish (*Ictalurus punctatus*)



Basa (*Pangasius bocortii*)

### Illustration 1: Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries Regulations (LA Statutes Title 56), adopted in 1991, and modified in 2001 and 2003

- §578.11.** Labeling of catfish packaging; possession and exchange of certain catfish prohibited; penalties
- A.** No person shall possess, sell, purchase, trade, barter, or exchange or attempt to sell, purchase, trade, or exchange any catfish or catfish product unless such catfish or catfish product is labeled to indicate that the fish is farm-raised or naturally produced (wild). When catfish fillets are possessed for retail sale, labeling as required by this Subsection shall be easily visible.
  - B. (1)** No person shall possess, sell, purchase, trade, barter, or exchange or attempt to sell, purchase, barter, or exchange any species of fish as catfish or catfish product unless that catfish is within the family of *Ictaluridae*, *Ariidae*, or *Loricariidae*.\*
  - (2)** Fish within the family *Pangasiidae* shall not be possessed, sold, purchased, bartered, traded, or exchanged as catfish or a catfish product.

\*Please note: State and federal regulations differ on the labeling of catfish in Louisiana.

## A Two-Part Process: Look for the USDA Stamp and The Common Name

Any restaurateur, retail store, or processor can ensure that what they are cooking and labeling is actually catfish by doing two simple things – 1) Look for a USDA stamp (Illustration 4), which is required on packaging for all fish of the order *Siluriformes*, and 2) Check that the fish's common, or usual, name on the label is catfish.

### 1) The USDA Stamp

All fish of the order *Siluriformes* sold in the United States, both imported and domestic, must be inspected by the USDA. It is therefore critical that all purchases are made from official USDA establishments. This can be quickly ascertained by looking for the USDA stamp, which occurs on every case or package that comes from an inspected facility. The USDA stamp lists the facility's establishment number, guaranteeing it fulfills all requirements. In addition, the USDA conducts a host of lab tests to identify what type of fish is being sold.

### 2) Identify the Common Name

Second, after identifying the USDA stamp, check the label for the common name of the packaged fish. Only fish from the family *Ictaluridae* and any other fish with common name 'catfish' can be sold, labeled and identified as catfish. LSU AgCenter and Louisiana Sea Grant have been working with local fishers to ensure their processes for wild and aquaculture-raised catfish are compliant.

## Knowledge Is Power

With an eye for the USDA stamp, the food industry can ensure that consumers are receiving exactly what they are paying for, and help Louisiana's catfish industry continue to excel in providing superior domestic wild-caught and farm-raised fish.

**Illustration 2: USDA Regulations, "Mandatory Inspection of Fish of the Order *Siluriformes* and Products of Such Fish," (9 CFR Subchapter F), December 2, 2015**

**§541.7 (d) (1)** Labels and labeling of fish in the order *Siluriformes* and the products of those fish must bear the appropriate common or usual names of the fish. For example, among fish in the family *Pangasiidae*, the labels and labeling for fish of the species *Pangasius bocourti* must bear the term "basa"; for the species *Pangasius hypophthalmus* or *Pangasionodon hypophthalmus*, "swai," "tra," or "sutchi."  
(2) The labels and labeling only of fish and fish products within the family *Ictaluridae* may bear the term "catfish."<sup>\*</sup>

**Illustration 3: From the USDA Fish Species Table**

Order	Family	Common Name
<i>Siluriformes</i>	<i>Ictaluridae</i> *	Catfish
	<i>Pangasiidae</i>	Swai, Sutchi, Striped Pangasius, Tra, Basa
	<i>Ariidae</i> *	Gafftopsail catfish Hardhead catfish

<sup>\*</sup>Please note: State and federal regulations differ on the labeling of catfish in Louisiana.

**Illustration 4: USDA stamp**



**Illustration 5: Seafood processing facility**

