

October XX, 2022

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi  
Speaker of the House  
United States House of Representatives  
1236 Longworth House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Chuck Schumer  
Majority Leader  
United States Senate  
322 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy  
Minority Leader  
United States House of Representatives  
2468 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Mitch McConnell  
Minority Leader  
United States Senate  
317 Russell Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Speaker Pelosi and Leaders Schumer, McCarthy, and McConnell:

We, the undersigned organizations and individuals, urge the inclusion of report language addressing inspection of wild-caught, domestic blue catfish (*Ictalurus furcatus*) that is included in the Fiscal Year 2023 (FY23) House Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration and Related Agencies Appropriations Report in the final FY23 spending package.

Since 2008, catfish inspections have been subject to U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) inspection, whereas all other seafood is inspected by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). In practice, this requires seafood purchasers and processors to pay for additional inspectors, often at overtime rates, making catfish an economically infeasible product to sell. A 2012 Government Accountability Office report estimated that this program costs the seafood industry up to an additional \$14 million annually.<sup>1</sup>

Blue catfish, first introduced to the Chesapeake Bay in the 1970s to support recreational fisheries, have since expanded their range to nearly every tributary in the watershed.<sup>2</sup> They prey on native species, including commercially and recreationally important species like blue crabs, Atlantic menhaden, and white perch.<sup>3</sup> Blue catfish predation is suspected to be an important driver in the recent decline of Chesapeake Bay blue crab populations; a recent study estimated that blue catfish consume up to two million blue crabs annually from one segment of the James River alone.<sup>4</sup>

Fortunately, blue catfish harvest can provide an important alternative revenue stream for watermen and processors when other fisheries such as striped bass and blue crabs are less abundant. Blue catfish are also generally available year-round allowing for consistent markets without seasonal disruptions. Wild blue catfish harvests in the Chesapeake Bay region were approaching 3 million pounds annually prior to the full implementation of the USDA inspection regulations in 2017.

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<sup>1</sup> United States Government Accountability Office. Seafood Safety: Responsibility for Inspecting Catfish Should Not Be Assigned to USDA. May 2012. Report GAO-12-411. Available online: <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-12-411.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Nepal V, Fabrizio MC (2019) High salinity tolerance of invasive blue catfish suggests potential for further range expansion in the Chesapeake Bay region. PLoS ONE 14(11): e0224770. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0224770>

<sup>3</sup> Schloesser, Ryan W.; Fabrizio, Mary C.; Latour, Robert J.; Garman, Greg C.; Greenlee, Bob; Groves, Mary; and Gartland, James, "Ecological Role of Blue Catfish in Chesapeake Bay Communities and Implications for Management" (2011). *VIMS Books and Book Chapters*. 10. <https://scholarworks.wm.edu/vimsbooks/10>

<sup>4</sup> Fabrizio, M. C., Tuckey, T. D., Buchanan, J. R., & Fisher, R. A. (2021) Predation Impacts of Invasive Blue Catfish on Blue Crabs in Estuarine Environments. Virginia Institute of Marine Science, William & Mary. <https://scholarworks.wm.edu/reports/2531>

Commercial harvest of blue catfish in Chesapeake Bay is currently hampered by USDA inspection requirements, stymying an important component of blue catfish management. We urge the inclusion of bill language from the FY23 House Agriculture Appropriations Bill and Report in the final spending package which would allow FDA inspection of wild-caught domestic catfish in FY23, as a temporary fix to this issue. The blue catfish crisis in Chesapeake Bay necessitates this immediate action while more permanent solutions are considered.

Thank you for your consideration of this request. We appreciate your support of domestic seafood industries and the Chesapeake Bay ecosystem.

Sincerely,

CC:

Chairman Leahy

Vice Chairman Shelby

Chair DeLauro

Ranking Member Granger