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Catfish Country of Origin Labeling (C.O.O.L.) Law Begins July 1

JACKSON, Miss.---Mississippi House Bill 728, requiring Mississippi restaurants to disclose the country of origin of the catfish they serve, will go into effect July 1, 2008. Governor Barbour signed the bill after it was unanimously approved by both the House and Senate.

The new law requires that restaurants serving catfish inform customers as to the origin of the fish by using any of several informational materials offered free-of-charge by The Catfish Institute, the marketing arm of the U.S. Farm-Raised Catfish industry. Although the law requires only one prominent sign or placard for restaurants serving domestic catfish, those serving imported fish must indicate so on their menus using the same font size and type as the menu's dining options.

"This is possibly the most significant piece of legislation the Mississippi Catfish Industry or, for that matter, the entire U.S. Farm-Raised Catfish Industry has ever had," said Roger Barlow, president of The Catfish Institute. "Since Mississippi is the leading producer of U.S. Farm-Raised Catfish, other catfish-producing states, including Alabama, Louisiana and Texas, are looking to us for leadership in establishing C.O.O.L. legislation."

Mississippi Commissioner of Agriculture Lester Spell has backed the bill since its initiation to the legislature.

"Country of Origin Labeling for all seafood—including catfish—is federally mandated in grocery stores, so it only makes sense to provide Mississippi consumers with this information at restaurants, where 70 percent of all catfish is consumed," Spell said.

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The U.S. government has repeatedly found imported catfish to contain contaminants, chemicals and drugs that are banned for use in U.S. food. For this reason, the industry believes consumers have the right to know where their catfish is coming from.

“This legislation should not be considered a burden for any restaurant, but it should be considered a validation of doing what is right for the consuming public,” said Keith King, president of Catfish Farmers of Mississippi. “It does not prohibit anyone from selling imported catfish, rather it merely requires imported catfish to be labeled as such on the menu.”

House Agricultural Committee Chairman Greg Ward says the bill protects an issue that should be important to all Mississippians—public health.

“When it becomes a health issue for Mississippians, then it becomes a matter of extreme importance,” said Ward. “Because of this concern, we wanted to make sure the bill was kept alive all the way through the legislative process.”

Mississippi restaurant owners should request C.O.O.L. materials from their U.S. Farm-Raised Catfish distributor or processor, or from the Mississippi Department of Agriculture and Commerce.

For more information about U.S. Farm-Raised Catfish, visit www.UScatfish.com.

To view HB 728 in its entirety, visit the state legislature’s website at the following address: <http://billstatus.ls.state.ms.us/documents/2008/html/HB/0700-0799/HB0728SG.htm>

The Catfish Institute was founded in 1986 by catfish feed mills and their producer members with the goal of raising consumer awareness about the benefits of U.S. Farm-Raised Catfish.

Cutline for picture: Roger Brock, manager of Cock of the Walk restaurant in Ridgeland, Mississippi, shows off a U.S. Farm-Raised Catfish plaque, which The Catfish Institute is offering to all Mississippi restaurants.

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