

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 19, 2018

The Honorable Robert Lighthizer
United States Trade Representative
600 17th Street NW
Washington, D.C, 20230

Dear Ambassador Lighthizer,

Since Vietnam and the United States normalized diplomatic ties more than twenty years ago, the comprehensive partnership between the United States and Vietnam has grown substantially. We must continue to build on the progress that we have achieved together, while addressing important trade issues, such as the ongoing dispute involving Vietnam catfish imports.

As you know, responsibility for inspecting catfish products was removed from the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), an agency that inspects all other seafood products, and transferred to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) under an obscure 2008 Farm Bill provision. The Government Accountability Office (GAO), the FDA, and the USDA have all stated on the record that there is no legitimate food safety concern with catfish imports. Further, we have been pleased that President Trump has requested elimination of this program in his last two budget requests.

Since its implementation, the USDA Catfish Inspection Program has done nothing more than erect a damaging trade barrier against Asian catfish imports to protect a handful of domestic catfish farmers in Southern states. Vietnam has threatened numerous times to file a legal challenge with the World Trade Organization (WTO) over unfair practices concerning these catfish inspections. The Vietnamese government followed through on their threat and officially challenged the United States at the WTO.


If the U.S. loses this latest WTO battle, it could negatively impact U.S. agriculture exports to Vietnam, including cotton, wheat, pork, soybeans, beef, poultry, eggs and fruit. Vietnam is one of our largest Asian trading partners and our 10th largest agricultural export market. Additionally, more than 525,000 American jobs directly rely on imported seafood, as domestic fisheries cannot produce enough sustainable seafood to meet the needs of American consumers.

Preserving and strengthening the ever-expanding bilateral relationship between the United States and Vietnam is increasingly more important, and the duplicative USDA Catfish Inspection


Program is threatening our trading partnership. We urge you to support repealing this wasteful program before the 60-day WTO consultation stage concludes.

Thank you for your attention to this matter. We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



John McCain
United States Senator



Jeanne Shaheen
United States Senator

CC: Secretary Perdue