

Lawmakers Fight Seafood Fraud

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MOUNT PLEASANT, S.C. (AP) — When the weather warms and the South Carolina humidity hangs like a soggy blanket along the coast, you can often find an entrepreneur selling shrimp out of the back of a pickup truck by the road with a hand-scrawled sign promoting it as both fresh and local. There's a chance it's neither.

And the fresh, local, red snapper you order as you watch the sunset over the Gulf of Mexico from the deck of a seafood place in Florida may just turn out to be none of the above.

In a nation where 92 percent of seafood is imported and labeling fraud is rife, both state and federal lawmakers are moving to pass laws to help make sure customers are getting the seafood for which they are paying.

A [seafood](#) [1] labeling law in the South Carolina General Assembly would mean that, among other things, what is advertised as fresh local shrimp is what it says — not imported and frozen. It would make it a misdemeanor to intentionally mislabel seafood.

A bill introduced this year by Maryland state delegate Eric Luedtke imposes penalties for intentionally mislabeling seafood like the Chesapeake Bay's iconic blue crab. And the governor of Washington last year signed a bill requiring all processed fish and shellfish to be labeled by their common names to avoid confusing consumers.

In Washington, the so-called SAFE Act — the Safety and Fraud Enforcement for Seafood Act — has been introduced in both chambers of Congress. It would require information, such as where and when seafood was caught, to follow seafood through final sale.

"It's gotten a lot worse in recent years with the number of fish coming in from all over the world," said Ben Hartig, a commercial fisherman from Hobe Sound, Fla., and chairman of the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council that helps manage fisheries off the coasts of the Carolinas, Georgia and Florida.

The conservation group Oceana reported last year that 33 percent of the more than 1,200 seafood samples it purchased and tested nationwide were mislabeled under Food and Drug Administration guidelines. Only seven of the 120 samples of fish purported to be red snapper really were red snapper based on DNA testing.

"We like to say it hurts the ocean, can impact your health and hurt consumers as well as honest fishermen," said Beth Lowell, who works for the conservation group.

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She said if people see a lot of red snapper being sold, they get the false impression there's plenty, even though stocks are rebuilding in the Gulf of Mexico. Customers may end up buying mislabeled high mercury fish when they think they are purchasing something else with lower levels. They may also be paying too much, thinking they are getting more expensive, fresh local fish rather than cheaper, imported fish, she said.

The group's study involved only fresh and frozen seafood. Spokesman Dustin Cranor said the group was not aware of any studies examining mislabeling of canned seafood.

"It's a huge issue that people are selling fish as something that it's not," said Chris Conklin, who has a seafood store and several grouper fishing boats he operates out of Murrells Inlet, S.C.

"I know a place where they pay \$2 or \$3 a pound, thaw it out and sell it for \$18 and call it local grouper," he said. As for people selling shrimp out of the back of trucks as local: "With the terrible shrimp season we had last year, there is no local shrimp left."

Robert Vanasse, the executive director of Saving Seafood, a nonprofit group funded by the domestic fishing industry, said Congress is probably in a better position to deal with the labeling and many times imported fish is mislabeled before arriving on American shores.

"What states can do is somewhat limited because a great deal of the problem isn't a local fisherman calling one thing something else," he said. "It's imports being called domestic."

Oceana's ocean advocate Beckie Zisser said the group is hopeful the SAFE seafood bill will be approved, saying it has bipartisan support in Congress and regional support from groups around the nation, including fishermen.

It hard for most people to tell if they are getting local shrimp, said Frank Blum, executive director of the South Carolina Seafood Alliance, an industry trade group.

"When you go into a restaurant," Blum said, "you can be fooled if you don't know the biology and how to recognize the different species."

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