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From The Catfish Journal

STONEVILLE, Miss. – Catfish industry leaders have issued a “call for action” in the face of increasing Asian imports.

More than 120 catfish growers and other industry members from four states gathered here April 26 for reports on the “Asian invasion” from China and other countries. At the conclusion of the meeting, called by Catfish Farmers of Mississippi, CFM members voted unanimously for Gov. Haley Barbour to call a special session of the Legislature to enact a Country of Origin Labeling (COOL) law requiring the state’s restaurants to inform customers where their farm-raised catfish was from.

The meeting, held at the Capps Center at the Delta Research Center, came one day after Alabama Agriculture Commissioner Ron Sparks issued an executive order banning all China catfish sales in his state. The action was taken after state authorities found traces of outlawed contaminants in samples of Chinese catfish fillets.

The CFM resolution notes that that “Mississippi produces products which are wholesome and safe, as well as provide jobs and economic viability to the communities where we live and work.” It asked Governor Barbour to seek passage of “country of origin labeling of catfish at the retail and restaurant level to preserve the health and welfare of the citizens of Mississippi.”

CFM president Keith King noted that the industry would push for proposal’s inclusion in a future special legislative session. The measure would seek to expand current state law requiring catfish labeling in grocery stores to include restaurants where most catfish products are sold. The restaurant industry has fought off such proposals in the past. But catfish industry leaders say timing is critical because of the food safety issues presented by the contaminated China catfish as well as the severe negative impact Asian fish imports are having on the U.S. industry.

“We’re going to be devastated, not only in the Mississippi Delta, but throughout the catfish industry,” said Consolidated Catfish Companies chief executive Dick Stevens. “We need a groundswell of support from the grassroots level. We need help now.” “We need COOL legislation passed so that mothers and children will be able to choose if they want to eat a safe product or not. They should have that option.”

Roger Barlow reported that both The Catfish Institute and Catfish Farmers of America have stepped up programs to deal with mounting Asian imports and a declining U.S. industry. He cited figures showing that all catfish imports in the U.S. grew from five million pounds in 2003 to nearly 75 million pounds in 2006. The January-February, 2007 total exceed year ago levels by more than 300%. Imports of channel catfish fillets from China soared from 540,000 pounds in 2004 to more than 10.7 million pounds in

2006. For January-February 2007, China imports totaled 6.8 million pounds, 727% higher than the same months a year ago.

At the same time, Barlow said, the U.S. catfish industry has declined sharply. After hitting a high of 661 million pounds processed in 2003, processing has fallen sharply to 565 million pounds in 2006. If processing continues to fall at its 2007 rate, the industry could decline to less than 500 million pounds - the first time it has been below that level since 1996.

“This is a call to action for the catfish industry,” Barlow said. “This is a call for unity.” The TCI president and CFA executive vice president said both organizations have redirected programs to address food safety issues brought about by Asian imports. At TCI, advertising campaigns are being developed to aggressively reach consumers with a message of healthy U.S. catfish products compared to dangerous Asian imports. In addition, a delegation of CFA representatives will travel to Washington, D.C. in early May to meet with U.S. Senate and House members from producing states to seek support for the industry.

“It’s very important that we tell what happens in China to our customers,” Barlow said, adding that all producers must stand together in support of COOL legislation. “We believe that all consumers have a right to know where their food is coming from, he added. “As an industry we must work together and organize at the national level. We have to dig our heels in and we can win this.”

Mississippi Commissioner of Agriculture Lester Spell told producers that he will support the industry efforts. “People know where their clothes and their shoes come from; they also should know where their food comes from.”

Representatives from the Alabama catfish industry said all segments of the industry must work together in support of industry programs. “We need to take out the border lines between the states,” said Alabama Catfish Producers Chairman Butch Wilson. “I’m asking everybody to pull together.”

ACP executive director Mitt Walker and Catfish Marketing Association Director Jamey Clary also supported unity. “We’ve got a great product,” said Clary.

In addition to alerting the public about the safety threats of Asian catfish products, Barlow said TCI will continue to drive home its positive message of U.S. Farm-Raised Catfish as a healthy, safe and nutritious product.

“We’re far ahead in the area of sustainability,” he said. “We are a green industry. We’ve written the book on sustainability.”