

September 24, 2010

The Honorable Barack Obama
President of the United States
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Ave, NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

We are writing to express our concerns about a pending Administration decision that could damage the credibility of the United States and our rapidly developing relationship with a key country in Southeast Asia. We write on this topic from experience, as former U.S. Ambassadors to Vietnam.

The Administration is currently considering a U.S. Department of Agriculture proposed rule to create an Office of Catfish Inspection, as required by the 2008 Farm Bill. The scope of the rule will be determined by the definition of the term catfish. The debate centers on whether to limit the definition to Chinese catfish (*ictaluridae* – the same species grown in the U.S.) or expand it to include *pangasius* (a different species of fish harvested in Vietnam). The USDA regulation would be in addition to existing FDA inspections and inclusion of *pangasius* would result in a *de facto* trade barrier on the Vietnamese product.

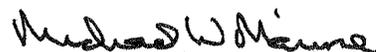
To paraphrase Yogi Berra, this is déjà vu all over again --- as this debate has already occurred. In the 2002 Farm Bill, Congress defined the term catfish as being limited to *ictaluridae*. We make no comment on the wisdom of that decision. However, USDA is now proposing an expanded definition of catfish to include *pangasius* to serve a narrow interest. We further note that in the same 2008 Farm Bill, Congress again limited the definition of catfish to *ictaluridae* (when dealing with crop insurance matters). Further, the same group pushing for an expanded definition of catfish at USDA has lobbied the states of Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Tennessee to limit the definition to *ictaluridae*.

We helped establish the foundation for increased trade with Vietnam. As a result, American farmers now export to Vietnam more than \$700 million worth of soy, corn, meats, poultry and other agricultural commodities. Vietnam merely asks for the same respect when exporting *pangasius*. Either the United States is a trusted trading partner who adheres to agreed upon rules or is a country that engages in linguistic gymnastics to say one thing but do another.

Mr. President, as public servants who helped forge our country's new relationship with Vietnam, we urge you to consider carefully the strategic importance of Vietnam in Asia. Our country's trade policy is a key tool in developing our relationships. Our actions should reflect our commitments and follow sound science rather than the narrow interests of a small minority.



Douglas "Pete" Peterson
U.S. Ambassador to Vietnam, 1997 to 2001



Michael W. Marine
U.S. Ambassador to Vietnam, 2004 to 2007