

# The Risks of Imported Crustacean Seafood in Louisiana, the Need for Nuanced Screening, and the Louisiana Legislature's 2023 Actions on Crustacean Seafood Safety

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## **Abstract**

Imported crustacean seafood in the United States poses significant risks and creates competitive challenges for states with substantial domestic seafood industries, such as Louisiana. Foreign seafood, often found to be unsafe and cheaper, negatively impacts the economy and undercuts local producers. In 2023, the Louisiana legislature launched a comprehensive campaign against imported shrimp, introducing 23 bills aimed at enhancing safety screenings, enforcing labeling requirements, and supporting local fishermen. These legislative efforts respond to the adverse effects of imported seafood on Louisiana's seafood industry, with additional calls for U.S. Congressional action on seafood reform. This paper explores the motivations and history surrounding foreign seafood issues in Louisiana and analyzes key proposed legislation from the 2023 legislative session.

## **I. Introduction: The Role and Importance of Seafood in Louisiana**

The State of Louisiana is closely associated with seafood and marine life, including recreational and commercial fishing activities. As a result, Louisiana plays a significant role in the United States seafood industry. Positioned at the northern edge of the Gulf of Mexico, the state encompasses over three million acres of coastal wetlands, which serve as critical habitats for a diverse range of marine life. This abundant ecosystem supports rich biodiversity and creates jobs that boost both the state's economy and the livelihoods of its residents [1].

One of the additional benefits for residents is the state's coastline size. Louisiana has the fifth largest coastline in the United States, stretching approximately 397 miles (639 km) and providing access to some of the most productive fishing waters in the country [2]. Seafood has long been an indispensable component of Louisiana's economy, employing approximately one in every seventy residents – equating to around 15,000 jobs specifically in shrimping and an additional 3,000 jobs in crabbing [3]. The seafood industry generates an estimated \$2.4 billion in economic impact annually, demonstrating its vital contribution to the state's financial health and its interconnectedness with other sectors, including tourism and agriculture [4].

Louisiana has established itself as a significant seafood supplier for the entire United States, making it an essential part of the nation's food supply chain. The state produces a variety of crustaceans, including shrimp, blue crabs, swamp crawfish, brown shrimp, and white shrimp. Notably, shrimp is the most widely consumed crustacean in the United States, underscoring the importance of Louisiana's seafood production in meeting national demand [5][6].

## **II. Habitats and Distribution Ranges of Key Crustaceans**

The diverse habitats and geographical ranges of crustaceans found in Louisiana have played a critical role in the state's rich seafood offerings, although their ranges are often quite expansive and different when compared to each other. The blue crab, for example, has an extensive range, found from Nova Scotia down to the Gulf of Mexico and extending as far south as Uruguay. These crabs thrive in various environments, including underwater grass beds and oyster reefs, which provide essential shelter and food sources [7][8].

Similarly, swamp crawfish (*Procambarus clarkii*) are indigenous to the Mississippi River and Gulf of Mexico drainages. These crustaceans inhabit various freshwater ecosystems, including rivers, lakes, ponds, streams, and swamps. Their ecological significance extends beyond their role in the food web; they also contribute to nutrient cycling and sediment turnover within these habitats, further enhancing the productivity of local ecosystems [9].

Brown shrimp inhabit coastal waters from Martha's Vineyard to the Gulf Coast and down to the Yucatan Peninsula. These shrimp are typically found in shallow waters, with their presence documented at depths of up to 360 feet. The adaptability of brown shrimp to thrive in a range of environments highlights the ecological diversity of Louisiana's coastal waters [10].

White shrimp (*Litopenaeus setiferus*) are native to estuaries and coastal regions stretching from New York to Mexico, with additional populations in South America and the Philippines. The widespread distribution of these species underscores the interconnectedness of marine ecosystems across different regions and the importance of sustainable fishing practices to ensure their continued viability [11].

### III. The Challenge of Imported Seafood

Despite the ample locally sourced options from Louisiana's seafood industry, the state faces significant challenges due to the influx of imported seafood, particularly shrimp. Seafood importation has shifted dramatically in recent years, increasing competition for local producers. In November 2023, the United States imported a staggering 155 million pounds (70,680 metric tons) of shrimp, a 10.9% increase from the previous year. The primary sources of these imports were countries like India, Ecuador, and Indonesia, which dominate the global shrimp export market and often operate under regulatory environments that do not align with U.S. safety standards [12]. These imported shrimp not only pose safety concerns but also undercut local fishers, forcing them to compete with foreign suppliers.

The United States has become the largest importer of Vietnamese Whiteleg Shrimp, a species that differs significantly from Louisiana's native white shrimp (*Litopenaeus setiferus*). The impact of this influx is further compounded by Australia's significant increase in Vietnamese Pangasius exports, with shrimp accounting for over 60% of Vietnam's seafood export turnover to Australia [13][14]. These actions of importation highlight issues of mass foreign seafood influxes. The combination of economic pressures and food safety concerns has led to calls for increased regulation and scrutiny of imported seafood to protect local industries and consumers alike.

### IV. Competition and Legislative Actions: Louisiana's Response

In light of the challenges posed by foreign competition, the Louisiana seafood industry faced considerable pressure to adapt and innovate. The state's legislature recognized the urgent

need to safeguard local producers and introduced a comprehensive package of 23 bills aimed at bolstering the seafood industry in 2023. Among these legislative measures, 14 specifically targeted seafood safety and economic protections to ensure that Louisiana's seafood industry remained viable and competitive in the face of increasing imports.

One of the most significant pieces of legislation introduced was House Concurrent Resolution No. 113, sponsored by Representative Schexnayder. This resolution addressed the critical disparities in labor costs and emphasized the adverse effects that cheaper imported seafood had on local markets. It highlighted serious safety concerns associated with imported seafood, drawing attention to the alarming drop in the price of Louisiana shrimp, which declined from \$3.80 per pound in 1980 to just \$1.50 per pound by 2017 [16]. The resolution advocated for the U.S. Congress to take action by banning the importation of shrimp and crawfish from outside the United States, seeking to level the playing field for local producers and protect jobs in the seafood industry.

Another legislative effort was in House Concurrent Resolution No. 105, introduced by Representative Garofalo, which highlighted the inadequacies of seafood safety screening in the United States. At that time, only 2% of imported seafood underwent testing for contamination, which stood in stark contrast to the European Union, where approximately 50% of seafood imports were tested for safety [17]. This resolution urged the expansion of testing protocols for imported shrimp by both the Louisiana Department of Health and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), aiming to enhance consumer safety and ensure that the seafood reaching consumers was free from harmful contaminants.

Furthermore, House Bills 528 and 600 tackled the issue of labeling requirements for shrimp and crawfish, proposing increased penalties for non-compliance. House Bill 600 specifically

targeted restaurants that misrepresented the origin of their seafood, ensuring that consumers could make informed choices and support local producers [18]. These legislative measures reflected a growing recognition of the need for transparency and accountability in the seafood supply chain.

In addition to these significant pieces of legislation, the Louisiana legislature enacted several other actions in 2023 that demonstrated a commitment to supporting the seafood industry. House Bill 161 provided tax exemptions for commercial fishermen, alleviating some of the financial burdens they faced and encouraging continued investment in the local seafood sector. House Bill 627 proposed a fee increase for the Imported Seafood Safety Fund, ensuring that adequate resources were available for monitoring and enforcing seafood safety regulations. Furthermore, House Concurrent Resolution 88 urged the FDA to conduct inspections of imported seafood to ensure that safety standards were upheld. House Concurrent Resolution 109 proposed tariffs on imported seafood, aiming to protect local producers from unfair competition and preserve the integrity of the local market. Lastly, Senate Resolution 159 called for stricter enforcement of seafood safety laws within the state, reinforcing the importance of maintaining high standards for both local and imported seafood [19].

## **V. The Path Forward: Addressing Screening Gaps and Ensuring Safety**

As the challenges facing Louisiana's seafood industry became increasingly complex, the pressing need for enhanced safety protocols became evident. Research findings, particularly a notable study conducted in 2020 by the LSU Agricultural Center, underscored the alarming

reality of food safety in the seafood sector. This study revealed that banned veterinary drugs were found in over two-thirds of shrimp samples collected in Baton Rouge, raising significant public health concerns regarding the safety of imported seafood and highlighting the critical need for more rigorous screening measures [19].

Moving forward, it is essential for Louisiana to increase the percentage of imported seafood subjected to safety screening. Strengthening regulations and enforcement mechanisms will be vital in leveling the competitive landscape for domestic workers and ensuring that local producers can compete effectively against imported goods. By implementing stricter import regulations and expanding testing protocols, Louisiana can better safeguard public health and preserve the integrity of the seafood it produces.

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