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Beware of fish fraud to protect your reputation for quality

Contributed by chef Mark Eggerding, U.S. Foodservice

Let's face it, fillets of fish can look very similar in weight and species. How confident are you that the order of snapper you just received from your supplier--and paid top dollar for--is the weight promised on the label and is not northern rock sole? It's quite possible you are one of many daily victims of fish fraud. Fish fraud, and, more specifically, short-weighting and species substitution, are illegal practices that costs restaurant owners, operators and distributors millions of dollars each year.

Last month, the Connecticut Department of Consumer Protection (CDCP) joined 18 other states in a multi-state frozen seafood investigation. The group tested 52 different seafood products and found that 26 of the products were mislabeled, meaning the packages contained less actual product in weight than was labeled. The CDCP reported that the product was, on average, 4.5 percent less than indicated on the label. Excess ice made up the difference in weight. And according to the National Fisheries Institute's Better Seafood Board, products made up of 10, 20 and 30 percent ice are often sold to restaurants. Whether operators realize it or not, that type of systemic fish fraud is costing operators and consumers.

But short-weight is not the only form of economic adulteration. Species substitution is another intentional fraudulent practice endemic in the industry. For operators who unknowingly serve a different species of fish than indicated on their menu, fish fraud can also damage the reputation and the success of their businesses and even result in violations and fines by regulatory agencies.

When Applied Food Technologies began to identify fish species through genetic testing in 2006, approximately 40 percent of fish tested for its clients was mislabeled. Just three years later, Applied Food Technologies reported a 70 percent reduction in species substitution for all its clients.

Statistics from Applied Food Technologies demonstrate that routine and random testing significantly reduces the likelihood for fish species substitution. But keep in mind that these stats are only for companies actively testing their fish products. Those not testing their fish may have seen little to no improvement.

To ensure that the seafood you are buying is everything it's supposed to be, operators must take an active approach to vetting suppliers. And with hundreds of species of fin fish and shellfish coming from hundreds of sources around the world, operators must depend on these suppliers to be an intermediary.

When you're dealing with seafood suppliers, it is crucial to ask the right questions. If they are willing to answer your questions, it is a good indication they are reputable. Here are some questions every seafood supplier should be able to answer:

- Where and how is your seafood sourced?
- How do you know the product is labeled properly for species and weight?
- Do you have a Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point (HACCP) plan in practice?
- What measures do you take to mitigate the risk of fish fraud?

What you can do

If you find a problem with the seafood you're receiving, notify your supplier. If you think you're purchasing mislabeled fish, let your local health department and/or the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) know. You can reach the FDA at (888) SAFEFOOD ([888] 723-3366).

Chef Mark Eggerding is senior vice president of sales and marketing for U.S. Foodservice, one of America's premier foodservice distributors offering more than 43,000 national, private label and signature-brand items and services to more than 250,000 customers nationwide. In the fall of 2005 U.S. Foodservice began working with the Applied Food Technologies lab to develop and implement one of the first fish DNA-testing methods that would help the food distributor better monitor and ensure its seafood supply.

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