



## Alaska Seafood Export to China and COVID-19 August 2020

### Overview

This situation report reflects the current knowledge on exports to China and seafood safety concerns in regard to the transmission of COVID-19. To be clear, there is no evidence that people can contract COVID-19 from food or food packaging. Please see the [ASMI COVID website](#) for more information on Alaska seafood safety.

### Background

In early June, after Chinese authorities identified packaging for imported farmed salmon that tested positive for COVID-19, the General Administration of Customs China (GACC) began a massive screening project issuing tests on food imports at all ports in China. Additionally, GACC asked international food producers exporting to China to sign commitment letters, to ‘protect consumer health from transmission of COVID-19’, stating the Foreign Agriculture Office (FAO)/World Health Organization (WHO) [guidance for food producers](#). However, this guidance states that there is **‘no evidence to date of viruses that cause respiratory illnesses being transmitted via food or food packaging.’**

### Response

#### International Response

- At the request of China, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) has developed a process to suspend the issuance of export certificates when an outbreak of COVID-19 occurs at establishments which export refrigerated and frozen meat and non-live fish and seafood to China.
- The Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment for Australia has [stated](#), ‘we will not provide extra certification or tailored statements for individual product exports that refer to COVID-19.’

#### U.S. Response

- The USDA and FDA released a [joint statement](#) on June 24, 2020 stating there is no evidence that people can contract COVID-19 from food or from food packaging.
- On July 29, 2020, the FDA released [guidance](#) for seafood exporters regarding recent requests for commitments on food safety related to COVID-19.
- On July 22, The United States Trade Representative (USTR) submitted a letter to the World Trade Organization (WTO) Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) committee stating



China's actions to test food imports and demand letters of commitments is unnecessarily disrupting food supply chains at a time of extreme fragility. The USTR dismissed the misleading language in China's commitment letter regarding food safety and public health. See the [USTR letter](#) to the WTO SPS committee.

- According to [a tweet from the FDA's Deputy Commissioner](#), "True then. True still today. There is no evidence of food or food packaging being associated with the transmission of the virus that causes COVID-19."
- The U.S. embassy in China has been in communication with GACC and is advising to follow current scientific information and not test food products imported from the U.S., as COVID-19 is not a foodborne virus.

### Food Industry Response

- The National Fisheries Institute ("NFI") views the entire effort by GACC as a violation of the Section 301 Phase One SPS commitments and WTO SPS agreements.
- The Alaska seafood industry views the commitment letters and testing as a huge risk for any seafood supplier to China. Some industry members have drafted individual statements that address how the company is complying with local and global COVID protocols, with the prominent guidance being the [FAO/WHO guidance](#).
- A recent scientific literature review done by North Carolina State University, in conjunction with the American Frozen Food Institute ("AFFI") concludes, among other things, that there is no evidence for the spread of SARS-CoV-2 through consumption of food or in association with food packaging, and no known cases of foodborne COVID-19. Further, no scientifically vetted methods are available for detection of Coronavirus on foods or food packaging materials. Despite reports implicating foods in Coronavirus transmission, the methods used are unlikely to be able to discriminate between virus that can cause infection versus remnants of non-infectious virus.<sup>1</sup>

### **Seafood Industry Impact**

- There are delays of more than a week for import processing due to reduced staffing. The industry must make decisions on product shipments considering these delays.
- There is general uncertainty in trade due to incurred costs and unstable business relationships for exporters.
- There are concerns due to the negative perception of seafood safety in China and lasting effect on trade/consumer confidence and spending in the domestic market.

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<sup>1</sup> [Scientific Review Shows Coronavirus Not Transmitted by Food, AFFI press release \(Aug. 21, 2020\)](https://affi.org/press-releases/scientific-review-shows-coronavirus-not-transmitted-by-food/)  
(<https://affi.org/press-releases/scientific-review-shows-coronavirus-not-transmitted-by-food/>).



## USDA/FDA Communications

- According to direct communication from FDA to NFI:

Owners of U.S. goods returned from export destinations can anticipate the returned shipment will be handled following routine U.S. admissibility procedures. Current scientific information indicates that neither food nor its packaging presents a public health risk for the spread of COVID-19. The FDA therefore does not intend to routinely conduct field examinations or sampling of FDA-regulated food or its packaging in situations where U.S. goods returned were refused entry into trading economies solely based on COVID-19. FDA may examine and detain the returned articles at its discretion if other reasons exist for the trading economy's rejection of the shipment or if FDA has independent concerns.
- Consistent with this, prior meat products imported to China and associated with positive packaging tests were allowed to be re-exported. However, USDA FAS trade and industry contacts have expressed concern regarding seafood products with ports exercising different actions. The guidance from GACC is not clear on whether production batch would be re-exported, destroyed, or continued to be held.
- USDA FAS indicated that GACC is monitoring media updates from international food producers to track food production facilities that have positive COVID workers. Product suspensions and/or a higher level of scrutiny with increased testing are possible reactive actions by China for these facilities.
- Although FDA did not agree to provide a declaration of food safety specific to COVID-19 for food producers exporting to China, the agency did encourage the use of the joint statement from the FDA and USDA on food safety and food exports regarding COVID-19. See below.

## Alaska Seafood Industry Recommendations

- Do not sign any letters of agreement/commitment from China. If needed, create a company specific letter stating the FDA/USDA statements (below) and other food safety resources found on the [ASMI COVID website](#).
- Advocate for support from the U.S. government agencies. Relay your industry concerns with the USTR, USDA, and FDA. The following contacts were provided as appropriate contacts to address:

USTR Ambassador Gregory Doud: [Gregory.F.Doud@ustr.eop.gov](mailto:Gregory.F.Doud@ustr.eop.gov)

USDA Under Secretary for Trade and Foreign Agricultural Affairs Ted McKinney:

[Ted.McKinney@usda.gov](mailto:Ted.McKinney@usda.gov)

FDA Associate Commissioner for Imported Food Safety Donald A. Prater, DVM:

[Donald.Prater@fda.hhs.gov](mailto:Donald.Prater@fda.hhs.gov)



**The USDA and FDA joint statement:**

*“The United States understands the concerns of consumers here domestically and around the world who want to know that producers, processors and regulators are taking every necessary precaution to prioritize food safety especially during these challenging times. However, efforts by some countries to restrict global food exports related to COVID-19 transmission are not consistent with the known science of transmission.”*

*“There is no evidence that people can contract COVID-19 from food or from food packaging. The U.S. food safety system, overseen by our agencies, is the global leader in ensuring the safety of our food products, including product for export.”*

**FDA guidance for seafood exporters regarding recent requests for commitments on food safety related to COVID-19:**

*“U.S. exporters of FDA-regulated food products are responsible for following U.S. laws and regulations and following the requirements of the countries to which they export. FDA food safety requirements are robust and ensure that food produced for both domestic consumption and export is safe. The FDA is also communicating its understanding of the science related to COVID-19 transmission and food safety to foreign governments.”*

If there are any further questions or insights, please contact Michael Kohan  
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