

The Seafood Safety Task Force

Minutes of Meeting
January 15, 2025

I. CALL TO ORDER

Ms. Samantha Carroll called the meeting to order at 1:13 p.m. in Senate Committee Room E of the State Capitol in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

II. ROLL CALL

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Ryan Montegut for Patrick Banks (Designee of secretary of the Department of Wildlife & Fisheries)
Gene Cavalier (Designee of commissioner of the Department of Agriculture & Forestry)
Chalin Delaune (Representative of the LA Seafood Promotion & Marketing Board)
Will Dubos (Representative of the LA Restaurant Association)
Jessica Elliot (Representative of the Retailers Association)
Martina Salles (Public Health Nutritionist)
Theresa Sokol (Designee of Secretary of the LA Department of Health)
Christopher Turner (Designee of Chairman of House Committee on Health & Welfare)
Thu Bui for Evelyn Watts (Designee of the Chancellor of the Louisiana State University Agriculture Center)

MEMBERS ABSENT:

Andrew Blanchard (A representative of the Shrimp Task Force)
Senator Patrick Connick (Designee of the Senate Committee on Health & Welfare Chairman)
J. B. Hanks (Representative of the LA Farm Bureau Association)
Rachael Matthews (Designee of Secretary of the Department of Environmental Quality)
David Savoy (Representative of the Crawfish Promotion and Research Board)

Ms. Samantha Carroll, Executive Director of the Louisiana Seafood Promotion & Marketing Board, called the meeting to order; those in attendance recited the Pledge of Allegiance and the roll was called.

Lieutenant Governor Billy Nungesser addressed the attendees, expressing gratitude for the legislative efforts of Senator Mike Fesi and Representative Christopher Turner, and acknowledged the support of the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries and the Louisiana Restaurant Association, and emphasized the importance of enforcing new seafood industry regulations.

Next, Agriculture Commissioner Mike Strain thanked the collaborating agencies and announced the implementation of new seafood labeling rules that will become effective as of January 20, 2025. He also outlined the role of the Weights and Measures Division in ensuring packaging compliance, indicating that 45 inspectors would cover all 64 parishes. Commissioner Strain emphasized the enforcement laws to prevent misleading labeling and mandating the clear display of the country of origin on seafood packages.

Also discussed was potential legislation to consolidate processes related to licenses and testing; collaboration with the Lieutenant Governor's office is underway to streamline these processes.

Ms. Carroll opened the floor for nominations for the chairman of the Task Force. Representative Christopher Turner was unanimously elected Chairman.

Mr. David Williams, SeaD Consulting, Houston, TX, discussed his company's involvement in the seafood industry and explained his rapid genetic test for identifying a specific type of imported shrimp, that is also capable of accurately identifying shrimp in various states (raw, cooked, etc.). The test demonstrated a 70% authenticity rate in Baton Rouge restaurants. The discussion then shifted to shrimp testing conducted in Galveston, which revealed high levels of imported shrimp, with genetic tests showing nearly 60% of shrimp served were imported.

The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) declined an interview with Mr. Williams regarding the investigation and issued a warning that restaurants may commit fraud through misleading decorations.

The portable testing process costs \$22 per sample, with the potential for cost reduction to approximately \$16 per sample through large batch testing. The test identifies the source of shrimp rather than detecting antibiotics. Over 250 restaurants were tested, resulting in only two restaurants being unaware they were serving non-Gulf shrimp. The discussion with Mr. Williams shifted to specific globally-cultivated shrimp. An RNA test developed in collaboration with Florida State University was discussed, that searches for a unique long-strand DNA or RNA sequence (17 or 19 pairs); a PCR machine amplifies the sequence for detection.

The test is characterized as inexpensive, quick, portable, and effective, and has undergone validation through peer review and genetic barcoding. While full barcoding is sensitive to contamination, the current test is more robust and capable of identifying shrimp, even after being cooked. The presence of testing can create urgency among restaurants to comply.

The five (5) points discussed are summarized as follows:

- 1. Importance of Authenticity and Enforcement:** A proposed transfer to the Department of Weights and Measures was discussed for improved enforcement. Investigations lead to public hearings and recommendations for action. The importance of authentic seafood labeling and the potential for consumer fraud through misleading claims were emphasized; the presentation highlighted the prevalence of imported seafood in the market. The members also discussed the need for robust enforcement of labeling laws and the role of regulatory agencies like the FTC.
- 2. ISO Accreditation and Testing:** The need for ISO accreditation for regulatory enforcement was discussed. While current testing is not ISO accredited, it can be validated through secondary methods. It was suggested to use initial test results for screening, followed by full barcoding for confirmation; test validation is conducted in ISO-accredited labs and serve as both screening and confirmation mechanisms. Regulators are responsible for identifying non-compliance, including reviewing invoices to determine authenticity.

3. **Seafood Testing and Funding:** Funding in the amount of \$131,000 has been allocated for seafood testing; \$50,000 from the Louisiana Shrimp Task Force and \$75,000 from the Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism, and the Louisiana Seafood Promotion and Marketing Board. Testing conducted at the Department of Agriculture's chemistry lab now costs approximately \$250 per sample, significantly reduced from the previous \$1,900. Baseline testing on Louisiana seafood will be conducted to establish contaminant limits.
4. **Legislation Efforts:** A House resolution was passed to support a 10-cent fee on imported seafood to increase federal inspections of imported seafood. Task Force members agreed that collaboration with Congress is essential to combat the influx of imported seafood in restaurants. The Task Force's goal is to gather support from other state Senators and Representatives, and members of Congress.
5. **Mislabeled products:** The current budget of \$131,000 is primarily allocated to testing. It was suggested to evaluate testing results before allocating marketing funds. Potential collaboration with the Department of Agriculture was discussed, with the aim of promoting Louisiana seafood and increasing public awareness.

The Task Force continued their discussion of strategies to promote Louisiana seafood, including exploring legislative funding for marketing campaigns, and utilizing billboards and media presence. The Lieutenant Governor highlighted his active role in promoting Louisiana seafood through various events.

Mr. Acy Cooper, Fisherman 42941 Hwy 23, Venice La. 70091, expressed frustration about the low price of shrimp, indicating that he is receiving less money now than in 1985. The decline in fishing licenses sold was also highlighted, and the impact on families and communities was emphasized. Mr. Cooper urged accountability from officials to help save their industry to continue the legacy of fisherman in Louisiana.

Ms. Kim Chavin, President of the Women's Southern Fisheries Alliance, 8238 Grand Caillou Rd. Dulac, La 70353, addressed enforcement issues experienced with the Louisiana Department of Health (LDH). She voiced concerns over compliance and unfair advantages and respectfully requested updated information from the LDH.

The Task Force agreed to meet quarterly throughout the year, with the next meeting being on April 9, 2025.

Representative Turner offered a motion to adjourn at 2:29 pm, to which there was no objection.

Allison M. Dumas
for Chairman's Signature
Representative Turner