

Seafood fraud: Old tricks may soon be foiled by new technology

Posted May 28, 2011 by ■ [Elizabeth Cunningham Perkins](#)

An advocacy group launched a new campaign against seafood fraud. But experts say baiting and switching is old business as usual in the U.S. fish market, with a high percentage of imported products and only tiny percentages inspected for quality and fraud.

Oceana, an international advocacy group that says its mission is protecting our oceans, announced the "Stop Seafood Fraud" campaign on Wednesday in Washington, D.C. at the National Press Club. At the press conference, industry experts explained how seafood fraud, the deliberate substituting of lesser value or quality products, hurts the world's oceans, as well as customers, no matter what form the practice takes: adding extra ice to packaging, falsifying documents or mislabeling fish.

The group claims seafood consumers in the United States are served fraudulent fish as a matter of course, often eating species completely unrelated to the ones they pay for, despite increasing concern about food sources, as more people want to "go greener" and grow healthier.

Consumers should not have to verify independently what fish they are buying, out of the 1,700 or so entering the U.S. market from all around the world, following hundreds of paths from boats to plates, Oceana insists. The group wants the federal government to do a better job of it, through better enforcement of existing laws, facilitated by better communication and greater coordination among all the federal agencies involved with the complex seafood supply chain.

In a written statement, Stephen Vilnit of the Maryland Department of Natural Resources summed up the group's central message: "Seafood fraud can happen at many steps in the supply chain. There are no longer any excuses for seafood fraud. We've got the technology to trace our seafood – and that's good for everyone from the fisherman to the consumer."

Oceana's full report about the new campaign is available for download in PDF format [on the group's website](#).

An [article](#) by Jennifer L. Jacquet and Daniel Pauly of the University of British Columbia published in the journal *Marine Policy* (Issue 32, June 2008) lists the most commonly mislabeled and renamed seafoods: Slimehead was renamed Orange roughy; Black rockfish is mislabeled Red snapper; Spiny dogfish was renamed Rock salmon; Farmed salmon is mislabeled Wild salmon; Patagonian toothfish



Oceana/Oceana.org

Black rockfish is one of the species of fish commonly mislabeled Red snapper in the U.S. seafood market, according to the advocacy group Oceana and other industry experts.

was renamed Chilean sea bass; and the list goes on. The authors say the most compelling motive for renaming and mislabeling seafood with more appetizing or pricier aliases is financial gain, while the economy and the environment suffer losses from this common "trade secret" practice.

But the new technology of [DNA bar coding](#) can relatively easily and quickly reveal what species a fish is, regardless of its label or nickname; testers enter tissue samples into the [Bar Code of Life Data Systems](#) to trace the true identities of fish, ScienceDaily reports.

Information published on the USDA website indicates [DNA bar coding is more reliable](#) than visual and protein banding methods of seafood identification.

Still, a [paper](#) on the University of Florida's Electronic Data Information Source describes the complexity of U.S. government food regulating: All 15 departments under the Executive Branch and dozens of government agencies under them touch at least one link of the seafood supply chain.

Will the appointment of a "fish czar" be necessary to streamline government enforcement of correct fish labeling?