

MEDIA RELEASE

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RELAXING RAW PRAWN IMPORT BAN TOO RISKY, SAYS INDUSTRY

THE seafood industry has called on the Australian Government to stand firm against pressure to allow renewed large-scale imports of potentially disease-carrying uncooked prawns.

Queensland Seafood Industry Association (QSIA) spokesman Mr Robin Hansen said today that overseas prawns carry a range of diseases that, while not affecting humans, are deadly to Australian prawns and other crustaceans.

Mr Hansen said the QSIA and other Australian seafood industry bodies were concerned at media reports the Government was considering relaxing the current ban on imports of most uncooked prawns.

This followed discussions in Canberra last week between Prime Minister Mr Kevin Rudd and the Prime Minister of Vietnam, Mr Nguyen Tan Dung.

"The QSIA believes these prawns -- because of exotic prawn diseases they carry -- present a real risk to Australian crustacean stocks, both in the wild and in aquaculture situations, and to the broader marine environment. The Association believes the current ban should remain in place," Mr Hansen said.

"The QSIA has not called for a ban on the large quantities of *cooked* prawns still being imported freely into Australia and is not doing so now. The cooking process is believed to kill the prawn diseases involved.

"The QSIA welcomed the Australian Government's ban on most imports of uncooked prawns, announced in July 2007. Diseases of prawns shown to be carried on a significant proportion of imported uncooked prawns have the potential to be transferred to the wild and to aquaculture farms, placing at severe risk Australia's \$600-million-a-year prawn harvest.

"We take the view that Australia would not import beef from countries with foot-and-mouth disease and should not import prawns from countries with exotic prawn diseases. These diseases do not affect humans but are fatal to prawns and other crustaceans.

"Once established in our wild and aquaculture prawn stocks, those diseases could never be eradicated, severely reducing seafood stocks, and the quantity of fresh local seafood available to Australian consumers. They also would severely diminish biodiversity in Australian waters, including the Great Barrier Reef. This biodiversity is something the industry in Queensland in particular has been required to make

great sacrifices to help maintain.”

Mr Hansen, who is Senior Vice-President of the QSIA and Chair of its Trawl Committee, said tests conducted by State Governments in Queensland and Western Australia suggest the majority of imported raw prawns carry diseases like white spot syndrome virus (WSSV), Taura virus or yellowhead virus.

While losses of wild prawns were difficult to estimate accurately, CSIRO researchers had calculated that, in relation to just farmed prawns, diseases like WSSV had caused global losses of between \$15 and \$30 billion in the past decade.

“More recently, the reported discovery of a prawn disease hitherto thought not to occur in Australian waters illustrates the requirement for the utmost vigilance. It has been reported that the Australian Seafood Importers Association has had samples of prawns from two North Queensland prawn farms tested by laboratories and found a variety of what is known as the IHHNV virus.

“The QSIA has ridiculed suggestions by the Importers Association that the fact one virus has been discovered in Australian prawns in some way calls into question the need for Australia’s strict control on prawn imports.

“In fact, just the opposite is the case: the fact that one of these diseases may have turned up in North Queensland means Australian quarantine must be even more vigilant in future. In human terms, it is like saying that, if we discovered smallpox in Australia, then we should allow in bubonic plague, avian influenza and Ebola hemorrhagic fever as well.

“The QSIA views the current restrictions on imported uncooked prawns as a test of Australia’s ability to protect its marine environment, and its sovereignty, in the face of expanding world trade demands. The science has been done: tests have confirmed imported raw prawns are carrying exotic diseases not found in Australia, diseases that, if they became established in Australian waters, would cause countless millions of dollars in losses in Australian wild and aquaculture prawn stocks annually.

“We have written to Mr Rudd to request that his Government stand firm in the face of this reported pressure from Vietnam and other ASEAN countries to relax Australia’s current proper quarantine restrictions on imported uncooked prawns.”

FURTHER INFORMATION: Mr Robin Hansen Tel 0428 794 992