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Americans get jobs and lower prices

By RUSS MENTZER
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Our government is not supposed to reward inefficient companies at the expense of American consumers and businesses, but that is exactly what could happen in a pending trade case on shrimp imports.

While domestic shrimpers argue that "cheap imports" hurt their ability to compete, the fact is they are caught behind a technology curve and find global competition hard to beat. They operate as they have for decades, trawling for a finite resource in the South Atlantic Ocean and the Gulf of Mexico with boats that are costly to maintain and insure. They face high fuel costs, unpredictable weather, short fishing seasons and federal regulatory restrictions.



Imported shrimp is efficiently farmed in developing countries with modern aquaculture techniques, producing top-quality shrimp at affordable prices year-round.

Today, imports account for 90 percent of all shrimp consumed in the United States. Shrimp has gone from a delicacy for the rich to America's No. 1 seafood, enjoyed by millions of families. Consumers have more access to shrimp than ever before, at a wide array of restaurants and retail outlets. In Georgia and across the country, shrimp imports allow companies such as King and Prince to employ thousands of workers in warehouses, trucking operations, processing plants, distributing companies, supermarkets and restaurants.

Rather than investing, restructuring and developing premium niche markets, a small group of shrimpers has opted for economic isolation, requesting that our government impose high taxes on shrimp imports so that they no longer have to compete fairly with others on a level playing field. The "dumping" petition they filed demands a federal food tax on imported shrimp from six countries ranging from 32 percent to as high as 349 percent. If they get their way, it will wreak chaos on businesses that depend on imported shrimp.

Domestic shrimpers claim these taxes will protect American jobs and save their industry. Yet for every shrimper, there are more than 20 U.S. jobs that depend on imports.

Isolationism won't change the fact that without imports, inefficient domestic shrimpers cannot come close to catching enough shrimp to meet America's demand. But that would not stop them from profiting mightily from this food tax.

Shrimpers expect to receive millions of dollars in subsidies under the so-called Byrd Amendment, which would channel these food taxes directly into their pockets instead of to the U.S. Treasury. Between subsidy checks from America's tax dollars and renewed command of a luxury shrimp market, they see fat times on the horizon.

To me, "fair trade" means that the government does not put its thumb on the scale for anyone — and that those who produce the highest-quality, most-affordable products gain customers without the government creating an advantage. Companies that adopt modern technology, and produce higher-quality products more efficiently, profit. Those that fail to do so lose out.

If U.S. shrimpers get the taxes they want, our government will have turned fair trade on its head by sheltering an inefficient industry from technologically advanced global competitors at the expense of American workers and consumers.

During the G-8 meetings that just concluded on Sea Island, U.S. trade officials urged foreign countries to tear down their trade barriers. The shrimping case is a concrete test of how truly we, as a nation, practice what we preach to others.

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