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Chairman—FRANCIS W. TAYLOR, *President, National Fisheries Institute; Warren Fish Company, Pensacola, Florida*

## **The Fishing Industry's Attitudes Towards Official Voluntary Quality Standards**

HARRIS MAGNUSSON

*Director of Technology, National Fisheries Institute, Washington, D.C.*

AMONG THE MEMBERS of the United States fishery industry there exists a full range of attitudes towards official voluntary quality standards. A number are enthusiastically confident that such standards would foster general quality improvements and therefore would increase sales. Others actively oppose any type of standards, because they fear the possibility of interference with their normal operations. These two extremes are occasionally the most vocal, but they represent only small minorities of the industry. Of most interest, therefore, are the less vocal members that form the bulk of the industry.

Twenty, ten and even five years ago, the bulk of the fishery industry showed no special desire for a system of official voluntary grade standards. Such standards frequently had been suggested; they had often been investigated, discussed, and argued, and occasionally even recommended. In 1939 and again in 1950, bills to provide for Federal inspection and grading of fishery products were introduced in Congress. However, these bills died because they were favored by so few in the industry. During those years a fear of standards seemed to be the dominant attitude. The majority of the fishery industry apparently had no desire for standards, whether they were mandatory or voluntary.

During 1953 and 1954 there were several signs that the industry's attitude towards standards was changing. The producers of at least five products took definite actions to develop quality standards. (1) Several of the major *breaded shrimp* producers, under the leadership of a National Fisheries Institute committee, agreed to tentative standards for maximum amounts of breading. (2) A large share of the Gulf of Mexico *shrimp* producers, through a committee of the Shrimp Association of the Americas, completed the preparation of codes for handling and processing fresh shrimp. (3) Packers of *crabmeat* from the Atlantic and Gulf Coasts, with considerable help from the National Fisheries Institute, cooperated in preparing a voluntary code aimed to improve the sanitary quality of crabmeat. (4) The *Maine Sardine* Industry, with cooperation from the Fish and Wildlife Service, developed practical procedures for inspecting and grading canned sardines. (5) The *fish stick* producers, through National Fisheries Institute committees, started to develop standards to improve and maintain the quality of their product. These efforts to develop standards were all initiated and promoted by industry groups. Therefore, they appeared to be excellent indications that the industry was no longer averse to standards.

As indicated by papers given at the Gulf and Caribbean Fisheries Institute 1954 meeting, both government and industry leaders took cognizance of the

apparent shift in attitude towards standards. Both groups were anxious to know whether the shift was real or superficial. The National Fisheries Institute wanted to gauge the new attitude so that it could effectively promote the industry's desires and best interests. Similarly, the Fish and Wildlife Service officials wanted to determine the extent of the industry's interest so that they could plan effective and valuable projects on developing grade standards. They did not wish to expend funds and time if standards were not really wanted by the majority of the industry. Would this desire for standards last or would it fade away within a few months? Would the industry as a whole accept or reject voluntary standards? And most important as far as the government was concerned: was the industry ready to shift its interest from industry-applied standards to official government standards? To secure answers to these questions, the National Fisheries Institute Technology Division was commissioned to make a thorough survey of the industry.

Two technologists visited nearly all important production and distribution areas in the country. Personal visits were made to more than 300 firms, located in over 100 cities, in 27 states. Standards were discussed with representatives of every factor interested in fishery products: fishermen, processors, wholesalers, brokers, distributors, exporters, retailers and consumers. Numerous additional contacts were made in group meetings and at conventions. The firms and individuals contacted, represented a fairly good cross-section of the nation's fishery industry. Therefore, the conclusions drawn should be valid.

Only a few individuals in the industry have had prior experience with official voluntary grade standards for foods as applied by the Agricultural Marketing Service. Many confused the suggested voluntary grade standards with the mandatory minimum standards and definitions of the Food and Drug Administration. Before attitudes could be determined it was often necessary to explain in detail the exact nature and operation of voluntary grade standards.

An attempt was made to classify the general reactions of the people visited. This showed that approximately 25 per cent were confident that a grading system would help the industry and they wanted standards for fishery products in general or at least for their own products. About 35 per cent believed that grade standards might be of value and therefore they should be tried at least on a few products. Another 25 per cent had no objections to voluntary standards, but really doubted standards would be practical. Eight per cent of those contacted either considered standards useless or possibly dangerous. The balance showed no interest in a grading system or were completely non-committal. Thus it seems to be fairly safe to say that approximately 80 per cent of the industry appears to favor giving an official voluntary grade standard program a modest trial.

As might be expected, those that favored giving standards a trial had a variety of ideas. A few even asked for mandatory, federally enforced, very strict standards. A large majority agreed that a few standards should be developed and made official as soon as possible. After these few standards have been given a fair trial, the industry should then decide what further action to take. If the first two or three standards prove practical and valuable, a wider appreciation of standards for other fishery products might be sought by the industry.

An attempt was made to determine which sectors of the industry had the most interest in standards, and which would be most cooperative in developing standards. It was generally agreed by producers and handlers that the program would be most effective if the following products should be given prior attention:

(1) fish sticks, (2) breaded shrimp, (3) blue crabmeat, (4) fresh fish, (5) fish fillets, and (6) fresh shrimp.

During 1955 the industry took several steps that confirmed the change in industry's attitude. The fish stick industry took the longest strides towards official grade standards. By the first of the year the N. F. I. Fish Stick Committee, working with technologists in the Fish and Wildlife Service Boston Laboratory, had already developed a polished draft of suggested standards for grading fish sticks. The details of the suggested standards and the possible procedures for applying them were thoroughly discussed at a meeting on February 2, 1955, to which the fish stick industry was invited. Only a few minor changes were suggested. Then the group unanimously adopted a formal resolution requesting the Fish and Wildlife Service "to (1) issue official voluntary standards based on 'Proposed Standards for Grades of Frozen Fried Fish Sticks' developed by the N. F. I. Industry Committee and (2) make available a grading and inspection service for voluntary use by the industry." The following April the Fish Stick Committee reaffirmed its February 2nd request to the Fish and Wildlife Service and also requested official grade standards for fish blocks.

At the 1955 N. F. I. Convention, the Breaded Shrimp Committee discussed quality problems and agreed to consider adopting standards. The Committee decided that all shrimp breaders should be called to special meetings to consider the whole question of the need for quality improvement and of voluntary standards. In June at Miami Beach and in July at Houston and Los Angeles, representatives of the industry met and agreed that more than breading percentages were involved in quality, and showed interest in standards on the raw materials they use. They were not yet sure that it would be practical to apply grade standards to breaded shrimp, yet they agreed unanimously to ask the N. F. I. Technology staff to work with Fish and Wildlife Service technologists to prepare a suggested draft of standards. That draft was prepared and has been submitted for review by several breaders.

The fresh shrimp industry is still basing its plans for quality improvement on industry-applied standards. The Shrimp Association of the Americas has developed excellent production and handling codes. Now it is struggling to establish an effective procedure for enforcement. The quality problem is being attacked from another direction by two local shrimp producers' associations, at Tampa and Fort Myers in Florida. The producers there have adopted a fairly simple quality grading system and employ their own inspectors.

Visits with crabmeat producers from Maryland to Louisiana indicated that a majority recognized that quality improvements were desirable. Although there was no strong desire for grade standards based on the flavor, odor, appearance, freedom from shell, etc., nearly all agreed that there should be some standard product designations. A meeting was held to which all producers of blue crabmeat—from the Gulf and Atlantic Coasts—were invited. Several of the major producers attended. The group resolved to ask health agencies to agree on uniform bacteriological tests and limitations. Also the producers agreed that action should be taken to reduce the confusion of names. A committee was commissioned to work on the problem.

Three sessions of the N. F. I. Convention in April were devoted to fresh fish industry problems. Nearly all wholesalers of fresh fish believed that an overall improvement in quality would cause a substantial increase in demand. Unfortunately few felt that a company can benefit itself by quality improvement.

Most of the firms insisted, and probably rightly, that they must temper their quality efforts to meet the price structure set by less careful competitors. It was agreed that standards for grading fish would be desirable, but probably not possible for quite a while. Instead, the Fresh Fish Committee asked for a self improvement program, based on a code of proper practices. The members believed this could be a preparatory step for the adoption of grade standards. The Committee proposed that a fresh fish quality improvement project be financed by the Fish and Wildlife Service with "Saltonstall-Kennedy Act" funds. Recently, the Service announced that an allotment for such a project had been approved; work should start soon.

In summary it can be concluded that the bulk of the industry does not fear the thought of standards, even official standards, if they are voluntary. The industry recognizes the drastic need for improvements in quality and in marketing practices, and is willing to give an official voluntary grading system a cautious trial.

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## **Voluntary Standards For Fishery Products — an Industry - Government Cooperative Job**

R. T. WHITELEATHER

*Assistant Chief  
Branch of Commercial Fisheries  
Fish and Wildlife Service  
Washington, D. C.*

AT THE SEVENTH ANNUAL MEETING of the Gulf and Caribbean Fisheries Institute, the general theory of standards was discussed. A hypothetical case was described showing how a voluntary federal standard of grade and condition would be applied to fishery products. The new and popular fish sticks were used as an example.

Further steps have been taken to advance voluntary federal standards, and success now depends on the practical use of standards. A draft of a voluntary standard for frozen fried fish sticks has been developed, the industry working closely with the Service on this. A preliminary draft of a breaded shrimp standard is being developed for industry comment. Thus, Government and industry have experienced together the somewhat complex but very educational processes any group encounters in the launching of the standards "ship" into relatively uncharted seas.

It may be thought that the field of voluntary federal standards has already been thoroughly explored—for example, by those in the poultry or processed fruits and vegetable field—and their principles applied to the fishing industry. Since fish are more perishable, greater safeguards for quality and therefore stricter standards are necessary. In order to retain their quality, fish are handled differently, stored differently, and marketed differently than poultry or vegetables. Our new work in the development of standards supplies ample proof of that statement.

A brief review of our experiences in this new area of industry-Govern-