

Regulation Degradation

Do you like eating in clean restaurants? How about knowing whether your salmon is farmed or wild-caught? Or having environmental regulation of fish farms? If you answered yes, then watch out!

There's a party going on at the World Trade Organization, and as usual with the WTO, you're not invited. It's called the Working Party on Domestic Regulations, and they are working fast and furious to eliminate the laws designed to keep us safe and in-the-know.

This free-for-all attack on domestic laws is part of the General Agreement on Trade in Services, GATS for short. In terms of seafood, this includes laws governing fishing, fish farming, food processing, labeling, storage, transport and even restaurant sanitation.

When the party finishes, countries could be required to prove that their own laws are "no more burdensome than necessary."¹ You may ask, why would countries have to prove *anything* before passing national laws to protect their own people and natural resources? We'd like to know that too.

Imagine this: A restaurant chain in China wants to open up a branch in Seattle, Washington. They're accustomed to following Chinese sanitation procedures. It could be very "burdensome" for the Seattle branch to meet U.S. public health standards. In fact, it might be so burdensome that they would rather challenge our domestic law, rather than abide by our rules. Unfortunately, it will be a small panel of unelected and unaccountable WTO judges who will decide whether or not these U.S. laws are too "burdensome."

WTO judges are notorious for ruling against consumer safeguards and environmental protections. They sided against the Marine Mammal Protection Act's dolphin-

safe tuna and the Endangered Species Act's protection of sea turtles.

What laws could be challenged?

A whole plethora of laws that we take for granted could be challenged. Here's a small sample:

- Worker safety standards at a tuna cannery;
- Mandatory health warnings for shellfish on menus;
- A Californian prohibiting fish to be falsely labeled as organic; and,
- An Alaskan law that requires labeling of farmed vs. wild fish on restaurant menus.

What is the WTO?

The WTO is a venue through which national "trade ministers" (unelected officials prone to representing corporate interests, not the public interest) determine the rules of global trade. The goal of the WTO is to remove any restrictions that make it difficult for corporations to conduct their business around the world. When new rules are made at the WTO, corporations profit at the expense of people's lives, livelihoods and the environment. Unaccountable and undemocratic, WTO rules override individual countries' laws.

Once upon a time, in the days before the WTO, international trade rules were about the exchange of goods across borders. Trade in goods creates enough problems, as any farmer who has been hurt by cheap imports can tell you. Now the WTO is stretching its tentacles deep into the realms of domestic regulations – tying the hands of federal, state and local lawmakers, and deciding far from home what our representatives can and cannot do to protect us and our environment.

It is up to us to prevent the WTO from inserting its tentacles in every arena: learn more, talk to others and tell your representatives at the state and federal level that the WTO should not be interfering with federal legislation.

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Endnote

¹ General Agreement on Trade in Services, Article VI:4.