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SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA -- THIS JUST IN

Seafood often mislabeled in L.A. sushi bars, tests find

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It's called species substitution and it's becoming increasingly apparent in L.A. sushi bars, where more than half of the seafood sold is not labeled correctly, according to a nonprofit watchdog organization.

Red snapper, Dover sole, white tuna and other fish were often a different species, the group Oceana found in DNA tests of seafood from 74 retail outlets in Los Angeles. In all, 55% of 119 fish samples from across L.A. were misidentified, Oceana said.

Oceana focused on the frequency of mislabeling rather than its origins. But Beth Lowell, director of the Stop Seafood Fraud campaign at Oceana's Washington, D.C., headquarters, said fraud can occur at any point in the supply chain, beginning when the fish is landed and through to processing, distribution and final point of sale.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration prohibits so-called species substitution. Still, the practice remains prevalent.

In California, state Sen. Ted Lieu (D-Torrance) introduced SB 1486 in February to require large restaurant chains to label seafood accurately by species and country of origin and also indicate whether it is farmed or wild.

Lieu said the bill, which Oceana supports, addresses the health implications of seafood mislabeling. He cited a U.S. Centers for Disease Control statistic that imported food is one of the main causes of disease outbreaks in the United States.

Eighty-six percent of all seafood consumed in the United States is imported, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

In the L.A. samples, red snapper was misidentified 100% of the time, DNA tests showed. Tilapia and pollock were popular substitutes, the report said.

Dover sole was discovered to be Asian "sutchi catfish" or common sole, and white tuna was often actually escolar, a snake mackerel with known diarrheal effects. The fish has been restricted in some countries.

Sushi restaurants had the highest incidence of mislabeling in Los Angeles, the study found. Oceana reported that 87% of the samples of 10 types of fish it took from 21 sushi eateries were not correctly identified.

All of the red snapper sushi sampled was mislabeled. Half of it was tilapia. Eighty-nine percent of the white tuna sampled at sushi restaurants turned out to be escolar.

Samples of yellowtail sold at sushi restaurants were often Japanese amberjack. Flounder was frequently sold as halibut, and sea bream was substituted for sea bass.

The main motivation for seafood fraud is economics. It is more profitable to sell an inexpensive fish that can pass for one that costs significantly more, especially if many consumers don't know the difference.

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