



DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

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MASSIVE POACHING OF CATFISH FOR BLACK MARKET UNCOVERED

A 6-month undercover investigation by Federal and State wildlife law enforcement officers has exposed a massive illegal trade in game fish poached from public waters in Oklahoma and distributed throughout the midwest. More than 40 people in Oklahoma and Texas are expected to be charged in the case, which is believed to have involved several million pounds of channel, blue, and flathead catfish over the past year.

The investigation was concluded March 17 by special agents of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, game rangers of the State of Oklahoma, and State wildlife officers from Texas. Thousands of pounds of filleted and dressed fish and a number of illegal fishing devices were seized by the 60 State and Federal officers who executed search and seizure warrants in Oklahoma, Texas, and Kansas.

"This case illustrates once again that coordinated Federal and State law enforcement efforts can be highly successful in apprehending violators engaged in large-scale illegal trade of wildlife," Interior Secretary James Watt said. "Over the last couple of years such operations have exposed several cases involving poaching and trade of hundreds of tons of fish. Such illegal activities undermine the efforts of Federal and State agencies to conserve our nation's fisheries and literally rob sportsmen who support these programs through fishing license fees and taxes on fishing equipment."

Blue and channel catfish may be legally caught by sport fishermen in Oklahoma, but commercial harvest is strictly prohibited. Flatheads can be taken commercially in some areas of Oklahoma under strict regulation and license. Suspects in the case are alleged to have caught the catfish by fishing mostly at night and often using illegal nets, shocking devices, trot lines, and fish traps that caught other species as well. Once taken, the fish were dressed or filleted, frozen, or sold fresh to restaurants, markets, and other brokers, fetching about \$1.35 a pound wholesale. These dealers sold the fish to outlets throughout the midwest.

Steve Lewis, Director of the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation, added "The exposure of the illegal taking of more than one and a half million game fish in one year from our State is a clear indication of the scope of the problem in this region. When sportsmen and other citizens are willing to report illegal activities they observe, violations will ultimately decrease." Lewis noted that Oklahoma and many other States now have "operation game thief" programs where citizens can report wildlife violations to authorities and yet remain anonymous.

The suspects may be charged with violating the Lacey Act, a Federal law that is designed to assist States in enforcing their wildlife laws. The Lacey Act makes interstate or foreign transportation of fish and wildlife taken illegally under State laws a Federal offense. Penalties range to \$20,000 in fines or 5-years imprisonment, or both, for each violation. Individuals may also face prosecution for breaking State laws by taking game and non-game fish for commercial purposes without a valid commercial license, possessing and selling game fish for commercial purposes, taking game fish by unlawful means, taking non-game fish unlawfully and aiding and abetting in unlawful transportation and sale of game and non-game fish. The individuals involved are believed to have been operating in small separate groups and are not thought to be a part of a large, organized ring.

Catfish are among the most popular sport and commercial fish in the South. They may grow as large as 35 pounds and 3 feet in length.

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