**Un-American Tuna**

*Why your kid can't get a tuna sandwich at school.*

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Nutritionists say fish is brain food, so you might think the U.S. government would make it available in school cafeterias. Yet for some three years tuna has been hard to come by when the bell rings for lunch across America. This absurdity is brought to you by the Department of Agriculture's "buy American" policy for school lunches.

The only tuna that qualifies for "buy American" is StarKist. But in March 2011 the Food and Drug Administration inspected StarKist's American Samoa processing operation and found it wasn't up to health standards.

Two other large tuna suppliers, Bumble Bee Foods and Chicken of the Sea International, might have stepped in. But they're not allowed to bid because their fish can be landed on vessels that are not U.S. flagged and the skinning, gutting and boning of their catch is done in Thailand. Apparently that makes it un-American. Never mind that the tuna loins are still sent to the U.S. where workers add 80% of the value of the final canned product. Or that those jobs—1,000 or so—in California and Georgia tend to pay between $12 and $18 an hour.

The fish tale gets more preposterous. StarKist takes its haul from the same Asia-Pacific waters as its competitors on both U.S.- and foreign-flagged ships. But the company says its tuna are segregated and only fish landed on U.S. vessels qualify for USDA purchases. (Yes, segregated tuna!) Its tuna are cleaned and processed in American Samoa, where most of the cannery workers are non-Americans from nearby independent Samoa.

The Government Accountability Office reported in 2011 that the median cannery wage on the island in 2010 was $4.76 an hour, well below the U.S. federal minimum of $7.25. The company says it pays up to $10 an hour. But in 2007 when StarKist's parent company Del Monte was based in Nancy Pelosi's San Francisco district, Democrats made an exception for American Samoa when they raised the minimum wage. StarKist is now owned by Korea's Dongwon Industries, but in 2012 American Samoa again won a carve-out from the U.S. minimum wage. For the record, Bumble Bee is owned by a U.K. private equity firm and Chicken of the Sea is Thai-owned.

To sum up: The USDA says a foreign-owned company that catches some of its tuna on foreign-flagged boats and cans the tuna mostly with foreign workers who make less than the U.S. minimum wage qualifies as "American." But two foreign-owned companies that buy some of their tuna from foreign-flagged operations and can their tuna with American workers is "un-American."
FDA inspectors gave StarKist's American Samoa facility a clean bill of health in July 2013, but the USDA has made no new tuna solicitations for school lunches. Congress's 2014 spending bill, passed in January, directed the USDA to re-evaluate its buy-American tuna practices.

The mere suggestion of more competition provoked a tuna meltdown from Samoa's Delegate to Congress Eni Faleomavaega. In a Jan. 27 op-ed in the Hill newspaper, he made unsubstantiated allegations of child labor by StarKist's competitors. The USDA evaluation report is due by Monday. What is really un-American seems to be competent government.