

Back in 2004, a federal earmark to spend \$1,000,000 on the branding of Wild American Shrimp caught the eye of Sen. John McCain.



When I say “branding” I’m not talking about herding the shrimp into a corral and using tiny hot irons to burn identifying marks on them. I mean giving wild shrimp an identity as a consumer product.

Sen. McCain, after deciding that this project was a bunch of pork, uttered his now-infamous quip: “Are American shrimp unruly and lacking initiative? Why does the U.S. taxpayer need to fund this `No Shrimp Left Behind Act?’”

Now, four years later, we can take a look back at the Wild American Shrimp campaign and decide for ourselves whether it was a good use of tax dollars.

A new organization, Wild American Shrimp, Inc. was founded, and the cornerstone of its mission was the creation of a Certified Wild American Shrimp program. The basic idea was to train shrimpers and processors about quality control, and to make sure that quality control was enforced. They worked with Sea Grant and land grant universities to implement the program. The producers who got training and proved that they could turn out shrimp that met WASI’s high quality standards got certified. That gave them the right to use the prestigious Wild American Shrimp logo in their packaging and advertising.

Certification is not an easy matter. WASI-certified shrimp get special treatment from start to finish. They even have recommendations about trawling times -- for example, not more than 2 hours if the water is above 80 degrees. That’s because when the water temperature gets that high, the shrimp degrade more quickly. The faster you can freeze it or chill it, the better. Then there are procedures for processing on-board, procedures for processing at the dock, and procedures for processing at the packing house.

After following all these procedures, you get shrimp that are practically perfect. They should be whole, firm, unblemished, fresh-smelling, and of a relatively uniform size.

Unfortunately, once it leaves the packing house, the producers lose control over the product. So if the grocery store or fish market doesn’t transport and store the shrimp properly, even the most pampered shrimp will turn mushy and nasty.

Here in Beaufort County we don’t have to rely on grocery stores for WASI-certified shrimp. We are lucky to be able to buy them directly from a number of reputable outlets.

Local WASI-certified vendors, according to Wild American Shrimp, Inc., include:

Bluffton Oyster Company, Bluffton, (843)757-4010

Dopson Seafood, St. Helena Island, (843)838-3281

Fripp Point Seafood, St. Helena Island, (843)575-3404

Hudson’s Seafood, Hilton Head Island, (843)422-6331

Port Royal Seafood, St. Helena Island, (843)838-1158

St. Helena Seafood, St. Helena Island, (843)986-4375

There are some other reputable local vendors who may not have completed the certification process, but are committed to selling quality local shrimp, according to the SC Shrimpers

Association Marketing Board:

Bradley's Seafood, St. Helena Island, (843)838-2942

Bryan's Seafood, Okatie, (843)379-3134

CJ Seafood Express, Port Royal, (843)812-6344

Gay Fish Company, St. Helena Island, (843)838-2763

Port Royal Shrimp Company, Port Royal, (843)524-6138

Rose Island CJ Seafood, St. Helena Island, (843)838-2062

Sea Eagle Market, Beaufort, (843)521-5090

Back to WASI. In addition to providing marketing materials, TV commercials, a web presence, and outreach to national food chains and restaurants, Wild American Shrimp, Inc. also has created a much-needed structure within which independent-minded shrimpers can work.

And these self-reliant souls are plenty ready to forsake the federal funding. Starting this year, WASI is moving toward a different business model. They are going after other sources of support, including voluntary industry contributions, foundation grants, and most important, a 5 cents-per-pound assessment to be paid on each pound of Certified Wild American Shrimp sold. So was this earmark well spent? You be the judge. Visit www.wildamericanshrimp.com and take a look at the level of involvement from chefs, restaurants, grocery stores, seafood processors, and shrimpers.

I would say there was an unmet need out there, and the earmark helped create something positive – and hopefully, self-sustaining -- that is of great value to our community, and to our region, and ultimately, to our country.