

Attorney General Bill McCollum News Release

September 3, 2008
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McCollum: Settlement Reached with National Food Distributor over Grouper Allegations

TALLAHASSEE, FL - Attorney General Bill McCollum today announced that his office has reached a settlement with a national food distributor over allegations that Florida restaurants were serving fish that was not the grouper advertised on menus. The settlement with Sysco Food Services – West Coast Florida, Inc. concludes the Attorney General's investigation into specific incidents of grouper substitution at restaurants in the Tampa Bay Area, an investigation that has spanned nearly two years.

"Grouper is an important part of Florida's market and everyone gains from ensuring that our restaurants are receiving and serving the real thing," said Attorney General McCollum.

In 2006, the Attorney General's Economic Crimes Division initiated an investigation of allegations that Tampa area restaurants were advertising and ultimately billing patrons for grouper, but were serving less expensive fish. Investigators collected samples from more than 20 restaurants and sent the specimens to a St. Augustine lab for DNA testing. Based on the lab results, 17 separate restaurants were identified as substituting other species of fish for grouper. The Attorney General resolved all of its investigations of the restaurants, but the investigation into the source of the fish continued and led to Sysco West Coast, a leading distributor of food and related supplies to restaurants in Florida.

The Attorney General's investigation revealed that Sysco West Coast supplied grouper products to 14 of the 17 restaurants under investigation for serving alternate species of fish. Today's settlement requires that Sysco refrain from marketing to its clients any items described as grouper without taking commercially reasonable steps to determine that the item is genuine. Furthermore, if Sysco undertakes scientific testing of its fish supply and the tests do not positively identify a product as grouper, or if Sysco has any other reason to believe the product is not grouper, Sysco will not market the product as grouper.

In addition to the steps to ensure the legitimacy of its products, Sysco will donate \$100,000 worth of food items to local soup kitchens and other related charities. The company will also reimburse the state's investigative fees and costs of \$200,000.