

Lawsuit advances accusing Bumble Bee of benefiting from forced labor

Four former fishermen allege they were harshly mistreated while working on a vessel supplying tuna to Bumble Bee

By Cliff White | Nov. 13, 2025 16:22 GMT



A display of Bumble Bee brand solid white albacore in water tuna cans. Photo courtesy of rblfmr / Shutterstock.

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A US federal judge has ruled that a group of Indonesian fishermen can proceed with a lawsuit accusing Bumble Bee Foods of profiting from selling tuna caught with forced labor.

The suit, filed on behalf of four Indonesian fishermen in March in the US District Court for the Southern District of California, alleges the San Diego, California-based tuna giant violated the US Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act (TVPRA), as [Undercurrent News](#) previously reported.

The four plaintiffs claim they were beaten, denied access to medical care and had their wages withheld while working on longline tuna vessels in the western Pacific catching albacore later sold under Bumble Bee's brand. They allege Bumble Bee knew or should have known of these conditions through its close commercial ties with the fishing vessel operators, Rongcheng City and Rongcheng Ocean, which sold tuna to its parent company, FCF Co.

In June, Bumble Bee [filed a motion to dismiss](#) the case, arguing that none of the fishermen were employed directly by Bumble Bee and that it was not responsible for the actions of third parties along its supply chain.

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In an order issued Wednesday (Nov. 12), judge Cynthia Bashant denied in part Bumble Bee's dismissal bid.

Bashant rejected the company's claim the law can't be applied to conduct overseas. She also found that Bumble Bee's role in sponsoring fishery improvement projects and securing Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) certifications potentially qualified it as liable for the conduct of

the fleet that supplied it.

*An MSC certification, which involves significant ongoing financial investment

and business advice, constitutes tailored active and ongoing support," Bashant wrote.

The ruling means the fishermen's claims for damages under the TVPRA and California negligence law can proceed to discovery.

The judge, however, dismissed the plaintiffs' request for injunctive relief, ruling they lacked standing because they are unlikely to face future harm from Bumble Bee's policies as they are no working on vessels that supply the company and have not expressed a willingness to return to such work, even if conditions were improved.

The fishermen had sought a decision that would have forced Bumble Bee to implement stronger human rights safeguards, including making improvements to its vessel management oversight and termination of its relationships with known abusive suppliers.

Bumble Bee has denied benefiting from forced labor. In a statement, the company said "unequivocally condemn[s] forced labor.

"We take any such allegations very seriously and require all direct suppliers to agree to adhere to our strict supplier code of conduct prohibiting forced labor," the company said. "While we're unable to comment on the specifics of the pending litigation at this time, we will continue to vigorously defend ourselves in this matter. Responsible treatment of fishers at sea is a complex, industry-wide challenge that requires both effective government oversight and dedicated industry action. We will continue to engage with leading industry groups and policy efforts to advocate for progress and deliver positive change, both within our supply chain and across the sector."

The fishermen are backed in their lawsuit by two law firms, Cohen Milstein and Shonbrun Seplow Harris Hoffman & Zeldes, as well as Greenpeace.

"On behalf of these courageous fishermen, I am gratified that the court recognized the strength of their TVPRA claims. These men endured horrific physical abuse, hunger, and debt bondage while working aboard Bumble Bee's so-called 'trusted fleet' tuna vessels," Cohen Milstein attorney Agnieszka Fryszman said. "This is an important step towards making one of the world's most dangerous jobs safer and more fair for the fishers who work so hard to put food on American consumers' plates and who should not be subject to forced labor. We look forward to holding Bumble Bee fully accountable under the law."

Despite the mixed result, M. Syaif'i, one of the plaintiffs, said he was "happy and overwhelmed" following the decision.

"This gives me hope for justice for me and my fellow plaintiffs as we struggle for justice and change for the better. Our fight and sacrifice are not in vain in order to get justice for all of the fishers," he said.

Contact the author Cliff.White@undercurrentnews.com

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