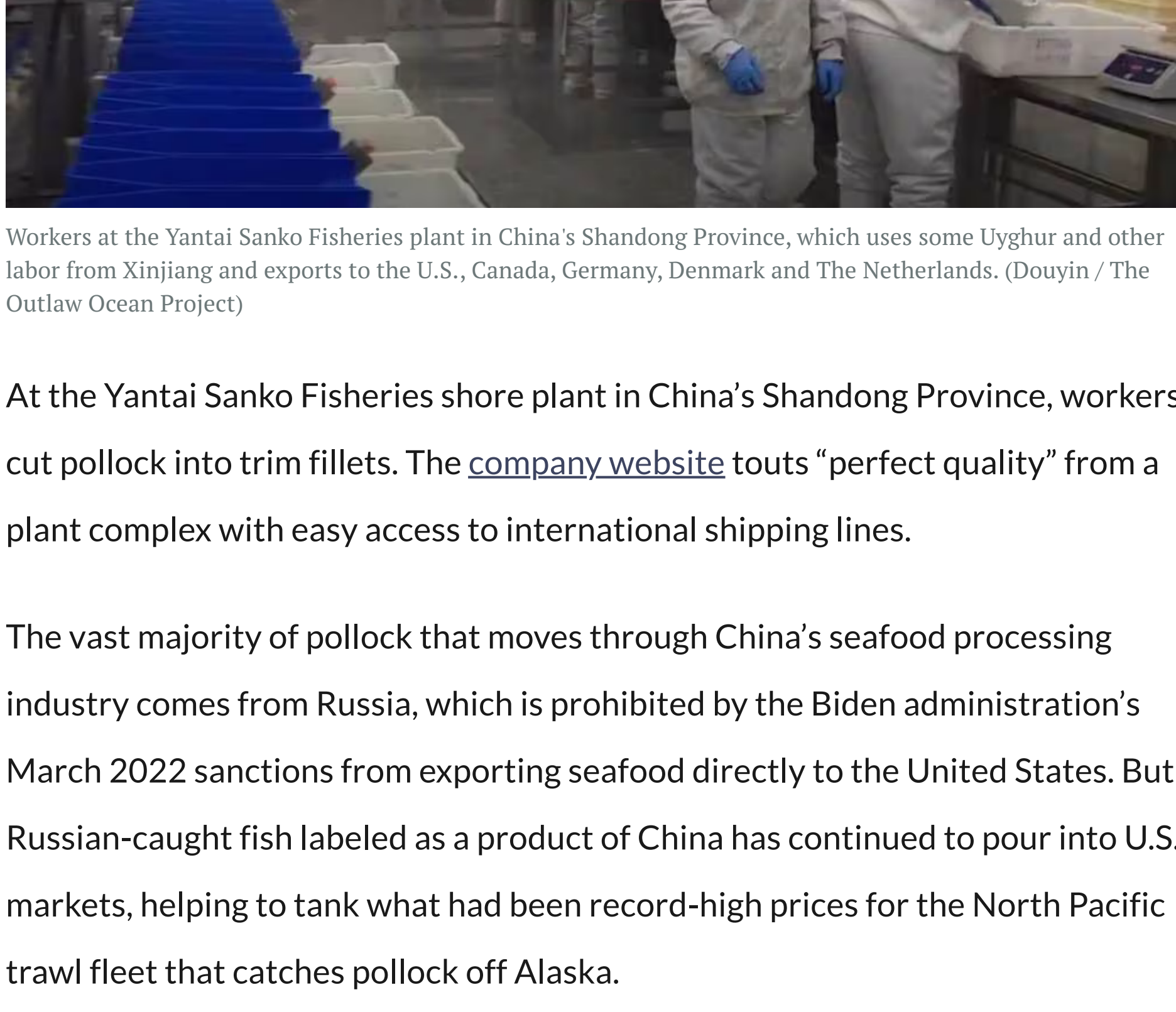


Business/Economy

# Alaska congressional delegation steps up efforts to shut down U.S. imports of Russian seafood processed in China

By Hal Bernton for the Anchorage Daily News  
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Workers at the Yantai Sanko Fisheries plant in China's Shandong Province, which uses some Uyghur and other labor from Xinjiang and exports to the U.S., Canada, Germany, Denmark and The Netherlands. (Douyin / The Outlaw Ocean Project)

At the Yantai Sanko Fisheries shore plant in China's Shandong Province, workers cut pollock into trim fillets. The [company website](#) touts “perfect quality” from a plant complex with easy access to international shipping lines.

The vast majority of pollock that moves through China's seafood processing industry comes from Russia, which is prohibited by the Biden administration's March 2022 sanctions from exporting seafood directly to the United States. But Russian-caught fish labeled as a product of China has continued to pour into U.S. markets, helping to tank what had been record-high prices for the North Pacific trawl fleet that catches pollock off Alaska.

For more than a year, Alaska seafood industry officials have called for expanding the sanctions to cover any Russian seafood processed in China or any other country. In recent weeks, Alaska's congressional delegation has stepped up efforts to try to make that happen.

Sen. Dan Sullivan, R-Alaska, has repeatedly asked Treasury Department officials for a new ruling that would reinterpret the sanctions imposed in the aftermath of the invasion of Ukraine to cover all Russia-caught seafood, no matter where it was processed. Rep. Mary Peltola took a lead role in putting together a [letter](#), signed by 38 members of Congress, sent Thursday to President Joe Biden. It asks for the closure of the “loophole” that allows Russian seafood processed in China to be imported into the United States “in defiance of U.S. sanctions.”

If the Treasury Department does not act, Sullivan says he's planning another attempt to pass legislation that would require the Biden administration to end these imports. He would try to move a bill through the Senate through a unanimous consent vote, a tactic he tried unsuccessfully in June.

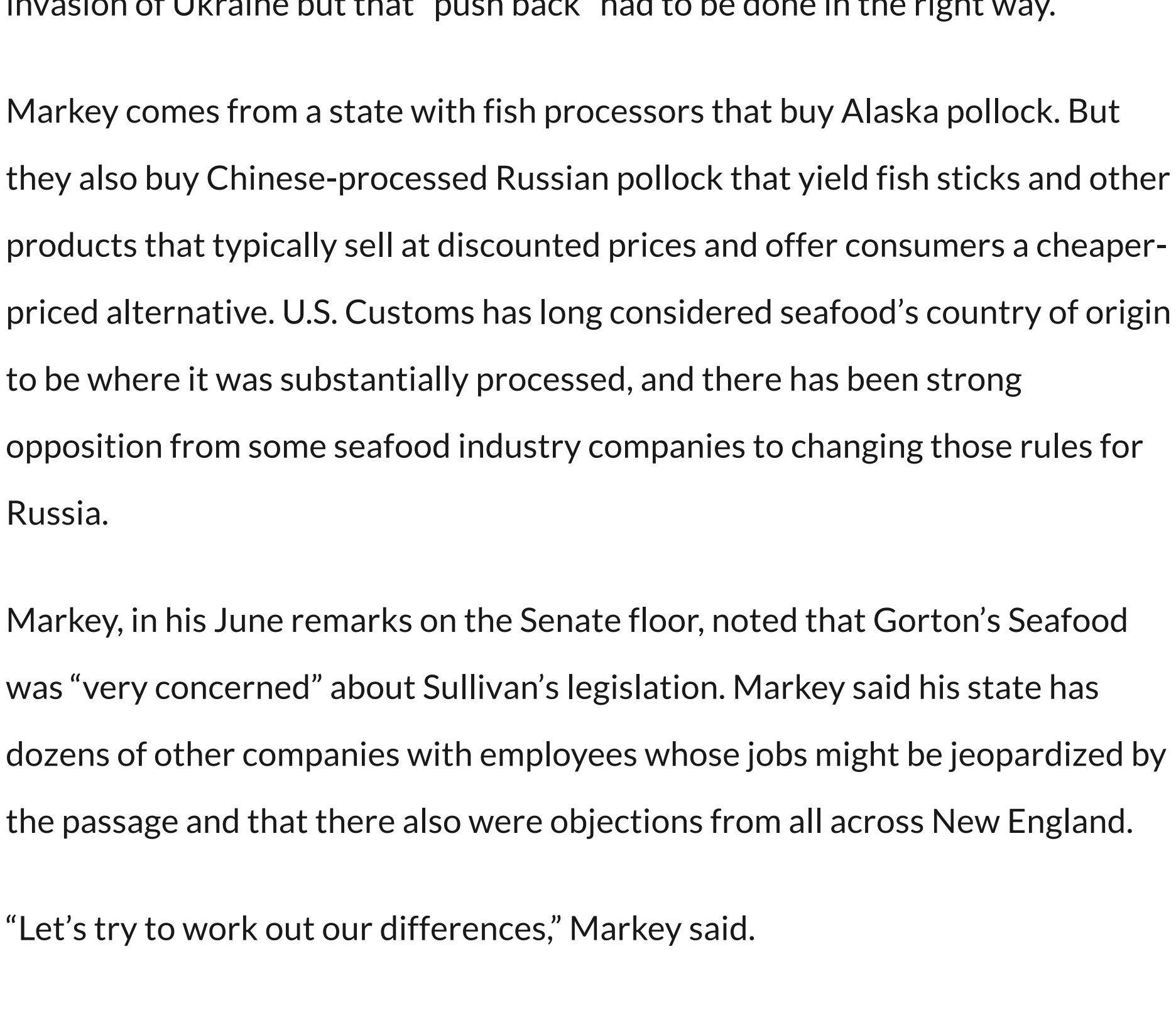
“I have been having a tough time getting this over the goal line. We've been working this nonstop,” Sullivan said. “Stay tuned.”

This campaign to clamp down on Russian-caught imports has gained momentum from an investigation by [The Outlaw Ocean Project](#) — a journalism nonprofit — into the Chinese seafood industry. The reporting, [published by The New Yorker](#) in October, found evidence that Yantai Sanko and nine other seafood companies have used the forced labor of more than 1,000 Uyghurs and other largely Muslim minorities from the Xinjiang region in northwest China.

Since 2018, five of these companies, including Yantai Sanko, have imported more than 47,000 tons of seafood into the United States, including pollock as well as salmon and cod, according to a review of import records by The Outlaw Ocean Project, which was founded by former New York Times reporter Ian Urbina.

Some of this seafood made it into the United States after December 2021, when Congress passed a law that seeks to prohibit imports made with forced Uyghur labor.

The Outlaw Ocean Project's tally of Uyghurs in processing plants represents a sliver of the total number of people who labor in the Chinese seafood industry. But companies that employ them and other Xinjiang minorities have relationships with dozens of U.S. companies, including some major U.S. seafood wholesalers and retailers, according to the project's review of import records and other information.



A still from a video uploaded to a Chinese government Douyin account in 2023 depicts a labor transfer organized by authorities in Kashgar in the Xinjiang province that is the homeland of the Uyghur people. (Douyin, Kashgar Media Center / The Outlaw Ocean Project)

The Outlaw Ocean Project also cited three Chinese processing companies that use North Korean workers, and have exported seafood to the U.S. Under a 2017 U.S. law, products made with North Korean labor are subject to an import ban.

Sullivan says The Outlaw Ocean Project investigation bolsters the case for keeping Russian seafood that moves through Chinese processors out of the United States.

“There's a moral issue to this,” Sullivan said.

In June, when Sullivan made his [initial attempt](#) to gain Senate passage of legislation to shut off Russian seafood imports, he was blocked by Sen. Ed Markey, D-Massachusetts. Markey said he “vigorously opposed” Russia's invasion of Ukraine but that “push back” had to be done in the right way.

Markey comes from a state with fish processors that buy Alaska pollock. But they also buy Chinese-processed Russian pollock that yield fish sticks and other products that typically sell at discounted prices and offer consumers a cheaper-priced alternative. U.S. Customs has long considered seafood's country of origin to be where it was substantially processed, and there has been strong opposition from some seafood industry companies to changing those rules for Russia.

Markey, in his June remarks on the Senate floor, noted that Gorton's Seafood was “very concerned” about Sullivan's legislation. Markey said his state has dozens of other companies with employees whose jobs might be jeopardized by the passage and that there also were objections from all across New England.

“Let's try to work out our differences,” Markey said.

Since the summer, Markey said he has had “productive conversations” with Sullivan as well as Alaska Republican Sen. Lisa Murkowski about this legislation, and supports an ethical sustainable seafood supply, according to a statement to the Anchorage Daily News.

## Uyghurs' role in seafood processing

In both the United States and Russia, pollock represents the biggest volume fishery, and in both nations, these fish are caught with huge trawl nets capable of sweeping up more than 100 tons in a single tow.

This year's U.S. catch off Alaska was just under 1.39 million metric tons, and almost all of it was transformed into blocks, fillets, surimi and other frozen products in below-deck factories or Alaska shoreside plants.

In Russia, the 2023 harvest was even larger. Russian fishery managers set the quota at more than 2 million metric tons of pollock, which has been largely pulled from the Okhotsk and Bering seas, according to Intrafish, a seafood industry publication.

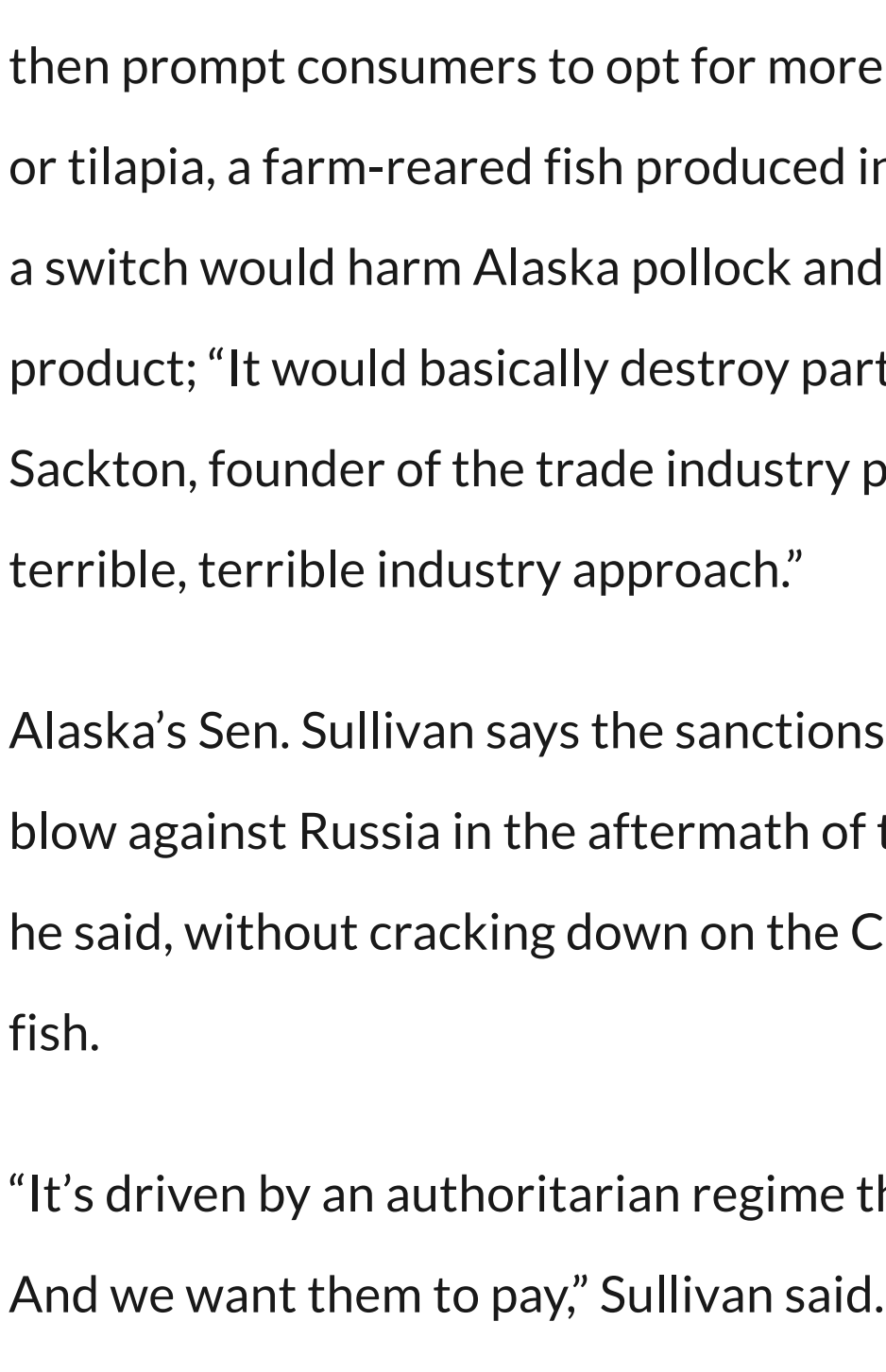
Much of the fish is headed and gutted, frozen, then shipped to China — more than 537,000 metric tons during the first 10 months of this year. In China, the fish is thawed, further processed then refrozen. Export markets include Europe and the United States.

The Outlaw Ocean Project tracked the Uyghurs' role in processing seafood, including pollock, squid and salmon, through a review of internal company newsletters, satellite images and videos uploaded to Chinese social media sites.

In one 2020 video taken by a Uyghur worker at a Yantai Sanko plant, crews are packaging pollock for shipment to a Brooklyn, New York-based company. The project obtained a 2018 promotional video from another plant that has used Uyghur labor — Qingdao Tianyuan Aquatic Foodstuffs — that features workers packing pollock for an American restaurant chain.

The Outlaw Ocean Project did not determine where fish processed by the Uyghurs was caught. But in the case of pollock, more than 90% of that fish is from Russia, according to an analysis of trade data.

The Outlaw Ocean Project's documentation of Uyghur labor was part of a larger four-year investigation of environmental violations and labor abuses in China's massive seafood industry that detailed the plight of malnourished fishermen held in conditions akin to bondage in distant water vessels that target squid, some of which is sold in U.S. seafood restaurants and groceries.



“We worked yesterday. Worked last night. We are still working,” a Uyghur man says in a voice clip uploaded to the Douyin social media platform in 2021 over snapshots of exhausted workers on pallets of flounder packed for export in a Chinese seafood plant. (Douyin / Courtesy of The Outlaw Ocean Project)

After The New Yorker articles were published, some North American and European companies stopped taking product from several Chinese processors, including Yantai Sanko.

In the Uyghurs' home province of Xinjiang, the Chinese government has carried out a mass detention and political indoctrination campaign, with forced labor a “central tactic” used for repression, according to [the U.S. State Department](#). The Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities who took seafood processing jobs traveled from their home region in northwest China more than 2,000 miles to Shandong Province by the Yellow Sea.

China's government officials deny the detentions and forced labor, and in official narratives suggest Uyghurs are grateful for their jobs. And the China Aquatic Products Processing and Marketing Alliance, in an October statement, said there is “no factual basis” to equate employing Uyghur workers with forced labor.

Urbina writes in The New Yorker article that some Uyghurs likely are grateful to work in the processing industry. Along with their salary, these workers may get free room and board. But he cited a classified 2017 internal prefecture directive that indicated those who resist work transfers can be punished with detainment.

Once employed at the seafood plants, Xinjiang laborers may be required to undergo “patriotic education,” which at Yantai Sanko has involved studying a speech by China's leader Xi Jinping. (Yantai Sanko did not respond to Outlaw Ocean's request for comments.) Most of their time is spent on the processing line as described in a social media video made by a Uyghur worker sent to one of the plants in Shandong Province.

“Do you think there is love in Shandong?” the man declared. “There is only waking up at five-thirty every morning, non-stop work and the never-ending sharpening of knives and gutting of fish.”

## ‘We can and must do better’

The U.S. pollock industry has been quick to embrace the labor findings of The Outlaw Ocean Project investigation, and repeatedly sought to point out the Russian connection to the Chinese seafood industry.

“These human rights abuses should be intolerable for all of us ... We can and must do better,” said Stephanie Madsen, executive director of the At-sea Processors Association, which represents factory trawlers that catch and process pollock off Alaska, in an Oct. 24 written testimony to a hearing of the [Congressional-Executive Commission on China](#).

In [her testimony](#), Madsen wrote that the story of the Chinese seafood industry cannot be told “without expanding one's gaze to Russia,” which she said is evading U.S. sanctions by funneling more seafood through China's processors in a business that raises tax revenue for the war in Ukraine.

In 2022, the China-processed pollock accounted for 32% of the U.S. consumption of this fish, according to an analysis by the Genuine Alaska Pollock Producers. Cod imports from China provide an even greater percentage of U.S. consumption.

Any move to cut off this pollock would need a change from U.S. Customs to require disclosure of the country where the product was caught or raised in aquaculture.

Some say this is a bad idea that would jolt U.S. seafood markets and upend the global trading system.

Tighter supplies would result in sharp increases in the price of cod and pollock, then prompt consumers to opt for more affordable alternatives such as catfish or tilapia, a farm-reared fish produced in great quantities in China. They say such a switch would harm Alaska pollock and cod fleets, as well as processors of their product; “It would basically destroy part of the white fish market,” said John Sackton, founder of the trade industry publication [SeafoodNews.Com](#). “It is a terrible, terrible industry approach.”

Alaska's Sen. Sullivan says the sanctions were supposed to strike an economic blow against Russia in the aftermath of the Ukraine invasion. That can't happen, he said, without cracking down on the Chinese processing of Russian-caught fish.

“It's driven by an authoritarian regime that is slaughtering people in Ukraine. And we want them to pay,” Sullivan said.