

NOAA riles critics with reversal on program to stop seafood slavery

By Rob Hotakainen

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NOAA will delay a long-planned expansion of a seafood inspection program that's aimed at removing illegal foreign-produced fish from the nation's food supply, the agency said Tuesday.

While NOAA officials said they needed more time to study the issue, critics warned that the agency's reversal would increase the amount of seafood caught by [enslaved fishermen](#) that's sold in U.S. grocery stores and restaurants.

"This is a huge mistake — we are going in the wrong direction at the worst possible time," said Rep. Jared Huffman (D-Calif.), ranking member of the House Natural Resources Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife and Fisheries, a panel that oversees NOAA.

In a joint statement, Huffman and Rep. Raúl Grijalva (D-Ariz.), the ranking member of the full House Natural Resources Committee, said that delaying action on the proposed expansion of the Obama-era program was "unacceptable."

"After years of talking about this problem and doing very little about it, NOAA is skirting its responsibility once again," the lawmakers said.

NOAA said its [Seafood Import Monitoring Program \(SIMP\)](#) currently covers nearly half of all U.S. seafood imports.

The program, created in 2016, requires importers to report key data that allows seafood to be traced from its point of harvest to its entry to the United States.

Under [a proposed rule announced last December](#), NOAA said it wanted to expand the program and to increase the number of covered individual species from roughly 1,100 to 1,670.

At the time, NOAA said the expansion would minimize the risk of mislabeling and product substitution and make it harder for importers to bypass the program's requirements.

But in a statement Tuesday, NOAA said it wanted to [withdraw the proposed rule](#) and would instead conduct a broad review of the program.

Alexa Cole, director of NOAA Fisheries' Office of International Affairs, Trade, and Commerce, said the decision stemmed from the varied public feedback the agency had received on the proposed rule and NOAA's "overarching interest in strengthening the impact and effectiveness of our traceability efforts."

"We've received feedback from our stakeholders indicating that SIMP may not fully meet their expectations, and now is the appropriate time to review the program's scope, format and overall objectives as we plan for the future," Cole said.

The agency also said the current program "will continue to operate in its current form and capacity" during its review.

Oceana, an environmental group that has consistently criticized the program for not covering enough species, said it was disappointed in NOAA's decision.

Max Valentine, Oceana's campaign director, urged NOAA to use the review to ensure that all seafood sold in the U.S. is "safe, legally caught, responsibly sourced, and honestly labeled."

“Until all the seafood we eat is held to the same standard, we won’t truly know what products are ending up on our plates — or how they got there,” Valentine said.

In their joint statement, Huffman and Grijalva said that NOAA had chosen to delay the expansion at a time when flagrant abuses in the international fishing industry are on the rise.

“There’s no reason SIMP can’t be expanded while it’s strengthened — we can walk and chew gum at the same time,” they said.

Huffman also raised the issue at [a hearing Tuesday](#) when a House Transportation and Infrastructure panel examined the role of the U.S. Coast Guard in fighting illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing on the high seas.

With a rise in forced labor producing seafood in China, Huffman told the Subcommittee on Coast Guard and Maritime Transportation that the issue is now "a huge human rights crisis that is seeping through our borders.”

He cited [an investigative report in *The New Yorker*](#), published last month in collaboration with the Outlaw Ocean Project, that documented the growing use of Uyghur forced labor in the processing of seafood, with more of it finding its way to U.S. grocery stores and restaurants.

At the hearing, Rear Adm. Jo-Ann Burdian, the Coast Guard's assistant commandant for response policy, said that up to a third of the annual global seafood catch — approximately 56 billion pounds — is now linked with illegal fishing practices.

“All of this, I think, demands our immediate attention and a much stronger collective commitment to seriously confronting this scourge. ... What we know now should be an outrage to everyone,” Huffman said.