

Investigation to detail hidden abuses powering global aquaculture, fish feed

Outlaw Ocean Project found U.S. seafood company and certification body links to a range of labor and environmental abuses.



Outlaw Ocean Project founder Ian Urbina testifies on April 16, 2026, during a hearing in Washington called "Dark Nets, Illicit Labor—Confronting China's IUU Fishing and Seafood Supply Chain."

Photo: YouTube

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A new investigation aims to peel back hidden human rights and environmental crimes within the aquaculture and fishmeal industries, along with certification bodies allowing seafood produced under these conditions to enter the U.S. market.

Outlaw Ocean Project founder Ian Urbina discussed his nonprofit news organization's forthcoming investigation, "Food for Feed," during a U.S. Congressional-Executive Commission on China hearing on Thursday about China's illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing practices.

While reporting for "Food for Feed" over past two years, Outlaw Ocean Project investigated and mapped roughly 1,400 fishmeal plants worldwide, boarded and inspected the vessels supplying them, traced the farms that are using their feed, and tracked where the resulting seafood goes, said Urbina.

Urbina said "Food for Feed" found that despite aquaculture's pitch as a responsible and sustainable alternative to wild-caught fish, major players within the industry can be linked to fishmeal and fish oil harvested using forced ship and farm labor, or environmental violations.

"It is the externality that helps produce cheap seafood," Urbina testified.

Urbina said Chinese abuses play a central role in the hidden costs of the global aquaculture industry. However, he also pointed a finger at the major companies, certifiers and government leaders allowing these products to reach American dinner tables, restaurants, schools, military bases and congressional cafeterias.

"That seafood from these regions is still reaching the United States shows how much work remains," Urbina testified in Washington on Thursday. "American seafood producers, grocers and food service companies, such as Sysco, continue to rely on certification schemes that claim to police sustainability and forced labor in places like China ... yet the cost savings are so enticing that industry and certifiers and journalists continue to make that Faustian bargain."

Outlaw Ocean Project's new investigation builds on previous reporting the group has done on China's [seafood fleets](#), [processing plants](#) and [IUU practices](#).

Chinese government-run industry, including more than 1,200 fish farms located in highly repressive regions known for enslaving and torturing its workers, are key players in that supply chain, according Urbina. The investigation found China is exporting products from these farms to the U.S. and dozens of other countries.

"Not only is that a violation of (U.S. forced labor laws), but some of these farms in Xinjiang are certified as sustainable by U.S.-based programs such as Best Aquaculture Practices, which seems mystifying in light of the U.S. law," said Urbina.

Urbina also testified that Outlaw Ocean Project's latest investigation linked these seafood practices to unrest in Morocco, Gambia, Mauritania, India and Peru.

"These are what economists call externalities — costs pushed onto distant countries and communities while wealthier consumers enjoy the luxury seafood produced as a result," he testified.

Urbina testified in Washington on Thursday along with retired U.S. Coast Guard Rear Admiral Scott Clendenin and former U.S. International Trade Commission Vice Chair Dean Pinkert.

The hearing also included video testimony of a fisherman from Indonesia who shared what he experienced in forced Chinese labor.

When U.S. Sen. Dan Sullivan (R-Alaska) asked Urbina, Clendenin and Pinkert for solutions as well as thoughts on whether the government should ban seafood from China, Urbina urged "strong action" to counter the ways in which IUU products are bypassing import laws.

"(Focus) on the certification industry and also the largest single corporate players — be they grocers or seafood companies — that the U.S. government relies on to provide its seafood ... and figuring out to what degree those players alone, through purchasing policy, can be pressured to change how well they police their supply chains," said Urbina.

Urbina went on to urge Congress to make companies do more to prove their seafood is legally sourced.

"If you want access to this market, then you've got to change your approach to verifying to us that you're not tied to these regions," he suggested. "I think that will affect the marketplace globally and have trickle-down effects that are more efficient than legislation sometimes."

In addition to expressing support for a government ban on Chinese seafood and other measures to combat the problem, Sullivan shared a warning to companies profiting off China's IUU fishing practices.

"If you're an American importer of a lot of Chinese seafood and you're watching this hearing, I would start kind of looking at new supply chains 'cause I think your days are numbered," said Sullivan.

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