

# Commentary | Marin Voice: Congressman pushes for justice along seafood supply chain

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Jared Huffman

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Rep. Jared Huffman speaks during a Martin Luther King Jr. Day event in Marin City on Monday, Jan. 16, 2023. (Alan Dep/Marin Independent Journal)



By [Jared Huffman](#)

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As your congressman, I work on a wide range of issues that are important and well publicized. But some of the most impactful work I did in 2023 involves something that is unknown and unseen by most people, yet vitally important.

Even many of those who have heard about illegal, unregulated and unreported (IUU) fishing and its associated human rights abuses could be forgiven for seeing it as a distant problem left to the mysterious realm of the high seas; one that doesn't reach our shores and certainly doesn't touch our daily lives.

But in reality, seafood tainted by IUU fishing and forced labor infests every part of the seafood supply chain. More often than not, those products wind up on our dinner plates – at home or dining out.

The vast expanse of our oceans is the world's final frontier. What happens beyond the horizon is difficult to know and even harder to oversee. But thanks to groundbreaking research from the Outlaw Ocean Project, a group I work closely with as ranking Democrat on the House of Representatives' Water, Wildlife and Fisheries subcommittee, we now have a shocking look behind the curtain of atrocities happening in the opaque seafood supply chain.

What they uncovered is nothing short of horrifying: Chinese fishing vessels skirting international law and plundering fish stocks off the coast of North Korea and other restricted waters; human trafficking victims – slaves – trapped at sea for years on end, dying from malnutrition; and Uyghur and other ethnic minorities shipped across Chinese regions, forced to work at processing plants under the guise of workforce development.

This is not just bad foreign actors like China; it's us. OOP's investigation provides hard evidence tying illegal and immoral actions of China's subsidized fishing fleet and processing plants to seafood products Americans consume. As the world's largest seafood importer, America has the power – and hopefully the fortitude – to implement the oversight and accountability needed, vigorously confront IUU fishing, and bring this scourge to an end.

I have been a leading voice in Congress for the past decade to improve federal fisheries management, including combating IUU fishing at home and abroad. This requires a lot of mechanisms and fixes. Some will take time and legislation – and I have those wheels in motion – but there are some things we can do immediately that will make a difference.

For example, my staff and I were distressed to learn from OOP's investigation that most of the seafood purchased by our federal government, including cafeterias in the U.S. Capitol, is tainted by IUU fishing. That's inexcusable. So, I took action – and the results have been swift and powerful. Advocacy from myself and my colleagues led Sysco, a major corporation and top seafood supplier, to cut ties with one of the processors implicated in the IUU and forced labor-tainted seafood supply chain.

Getting a major seafood supplier to clean up its act is progress, but we're just scratching the surface. The network of bad actors, like the oceans they're befouling, runs deep and wide, so I'm working to drive more wide-scale reforms.

I've written letters to the Biden administration calling for increased oversight, demanded the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration update the Seafood Import Monitoring Program and questioned the U.S. Coast Guard on jurisdictional barriers to stopping illegal imports. I also successfully passed legislation to expand monitoring on U.S. fishing vessels.

The lawless nature of the high seas and the many unscrupulous countries with whom we trade – whose standards (legally and morally) are far lower than what America prides itself on – invites exploitation and abuse of natural resources, fishermen trapped on IUU fleets and minority workers exploited at processing plants. But with transparency, oversight and international cooperation, we can save lives and bring justice to the seafood supply chain.

*Rep. Jared Huffman, of San Rafael, represents District 2, including Marin County, in the U.S. House of Representatives. He is running for reelection in the March 5 primary election.*