

## Are lawmakers eating seafood produced by slaves?

Rep. Jared Huffman said there's no doubt illegally produced foreign seafood has made its way to the Capitol. "I mean, that's just a certainty," he said Friday.



BY: **ROB HOTAKAINEN** | 02/06/2024 06:27 AM EST



Workers at a cafeteria on Capitol Hill on Sept. 27, 2023. Some lawmakers worry that seafood on Capitol Hill may have connections to slave labor abroad. | Francis Chung/POLITICO

**E&E DAILY** | After working for years to rid the country of foreign seafood produced by enslaved people, Rep. Jared Huffman says the issue has struck close to home.

"We have been eating slavery-tainted seafood in the Capitol — I mean, that's just a certainty," the California Democrat said in an interview Friday.

Huffman is among a group of 22 bipartisan House members who say the Biden administration has not done enough to crack down on Sysco, a major Texas-based supplier that provides food throughout the Capitol and in executive office buildings. Reports have linked the company's products to forced labor in China.

Huffman, the ranking member of the House Natural Resources Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife and Fisheries, also put the blame on NOAA, saying the agency has failed with its inspections of imported seafood.

"Honestly, I think we've just got to have a very candid conversation about the fact that NOAA and the Department of Commerce have proven completely incapable of doing this," he said.

"And my view is we need to look at where in the federal government a more dedicated and competent approach to it might reside."

Neither the White House nor NOAA responded to a request for comment.

The lawmakers — 20 Democrats and two Republicans — first expressed their concerns last month in a letter to President Joe Biden, saying it was "quite possible that we have unknowingly been served seafood products tainted by IUU (illegal, unreported and unregulated) fishing and forced labor."

They said that included members of Congress, their staffs and visitors.

Huffman took it a step further Friday, saying: "There's no maybe about it."

He added that the White House has not responded to the [Jan. 9 letter](#).

"I would certainly welcome that, but we're not letting go of this," Huffman said.

"We're gonna keep leaning in until we see the kind of change that we think is necessary."



A driver for Sysco unloads supplies for a restaurant in Cleveland on Dec. 21, 2010. | Mark Duncan/AP

In a statement to E&E News, a spokesperson for Sysco said the company "takes an aggressive stand on human and labor rights violations in our supply chain and we are actively moving to sever ties to companies that fail to uphold our standards."

He said the company had already cut ties and halted purchases from two companies.

"Our dedication to responsible sourcing is unwavering and we will make continuous process improvements to strengthen our dedication to upholding human rights violations in our supply chain," the spokesperson said.

Kevin Hourican, Sysco's president and chief executive officer, also defended the company in a [January letter to Huffman](#), saying, "We can all agree that human rights violations, wherever they may occur in the world or as part of any supply chain, are abhorrent and unacceptable."

"Knowing that this is a broad-based supply chain concern, Sysco will continue to do our part by leading our industry in upholding human rights," he told Huffman.

### 'Like talking to your cat'



Rep. Jared Huffman (D-Calif.). | Francis Chung/POLITICO

In addition to criticizing NOAA, Huffman said lawmakers had tried to get the Customs and Border Protection and the State Department to take the issue more seriously, with no luck.

"You know, it's like talking to your cat," he said.

Huffman also said Sysco should do more: "One thing that they could do is they could work with us on how to make serious reforms to this supply chain system we have."

In their letter to Biden, the lawmakers said Sysco needs to improve its practices "to ensure their entire seafood supply is untainted."

"Until Sysco Corporation fully addresses these allegations and severs connections to all companies associated with forced labor on land and at sea, the United States must terminate its relationship with the company," they told the president.

The group of lawmakers, which included Natural Resources ranking member Raúl Grijalva (D-Ariz.), noted that some of Sysco's contracts with the federal government do not expire until 2028.

According to the letter, the contracts with the company call for providing fish and other seafood products to a long list of agencies, including the Bureau of Indian Education, the Fish and Wildlife Service, the Bureau of Land Management, the Department of Agriculture, the Indian Health Service, the Army Corps of Engineers, the Army, and the Department of Veterans Affairs.

"This means that our nation's military trainees, veterans, federal employees, and tribal nations have also likely unknowingly been provided with seafood products directly connected to forced labor and IUU fishing within Sysco Corporation's supply chain," the lawmakers wrote.

A spokesperson for the Interior Department said the department had no comment.

Huffman, Grijalva and other critics [expressed frustration with NOAA](#) in November when the agency said it would delay a long-planned expansion of its seafood inspection program and that it needed more time to study the issue.

Huffman repeated his criticism Friday, saying, "As if we haven't taken the last decade to study it."

In November, Huffman called the delay "a huge mistake," citing [an investigative report in \*The New Yorker\*](#), published in October in collaboration with the Outlaw Ocean Project.

It 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.

All told, the lawmakers said, the U.S. government has now "inadvertently expended" more than \$200 million in the past five years on seafood linked to Uyghur labor.