

Consumers demand retailer action in wake of exposés

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By SeaChoice



Nearly 5000 consumers call on major retailers to stop human rights abuses in their seafood supply in response to reports connecting tainted seafood back to North American shelves.

In October of 2023, the **first half** of a four-part series by The Outlaw Ocean Project (Outlaw Ocean) was released, connecting severe human rights and environmental violations in China's fishing and processing operations to seafood products on North American shelves. Several months later, investigations by Outlaw Ocean and Corporate Accountability Lab (CAL) uncovered **serious allegations** in the Indian shrimp supply chain - from hatcheries and shrimp farms to processing plants. Collectively, these reports unveiled countless acts of inhumane working conditions, forced labor, child labor, severe abuse, neglect, murder, debt bondage, illegal and unregulated fishing, and more.

In response to these findings, SeaChoice activated 4,795 consumers to send letters to the following retailers previously profiled on Seafood Progress: Buy-Low Foods, Costco, Metro, Save-On-Foods, Sobeys and Walmart. These letters called on retailers to take true responsibility for all the seafood they sell (not just **their own brands**), stop relying exclusively on **certifications** and audits, and take a due diligence approach to sourcing.

The report series included a unique **discussion page** where correspondence - or lack thereof - between Outlaw Ocean and the companies found to be selling tainted seafood products was published. Some retailers - like **Walmart** and **Costco** - declined to respond at all, while others engaged and promised to investigate the allegations.

Astonishingly, nearly a year has passed since the first report in the Outlaw Ocean series was released, and none of these retailers have published updates around what they're doing in response to the disturbing findings.

SeaChoice also reached out directly to the retailers to inform them of the campaign and offer guidance around next steps (read the letter **here**). Concerningly, only one retailer responded, and the oblivious nature of the message indicated they had not actually reviewed the report findings or supporting resources we had provided.

To say this silence and oblivion is concerning would be an understatement. And it's not just the corporate players that are stalling...

The Canadian government has also failed to act in response to the report findings.

In a **recent report**, Outlaw Ocean stated that "while the U.S. has not imposed targeted sanctions as of yet, relevant authorities have begun the process of banning imports from companies tied to the investigation. The Canadian government has made no indication it will do the same. Human-rights advocates in Canada have said this silence and inaction from the Canadian government could create a potential backdoor through which imports rejected by the U.S. might re-route to Canada without issue."

In addition to the Outlaw Ocean reports drawing attention to the egregious human rights and environmental violations occurring in seafood production, it also highlighted the limitations and weaknesses of industry's continued endorsement of and reliance on flawed voluntary systems, including eco-certifications. **New research** suggests "the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC), the world's most recognized ecolabel for sustainable seafood...does not screen vessels or companies against publicized lists of labor abuses. These Standards leave room for vessels associated with crimes such as human trafficking and forced labor to benefit and profit from the MSC ecolabel."

This has resulted in key seafood supply chain actors - including major retailers and prominent certifications - being under increasing scrutiny from media, regulators, and civil society.

Meanwhile, human rights and sustainability due diligence within supply chains is gaining momentum, with the European Parliament having **recently adopted mandatory legislation**. This presents the opportunity to leverage the EU precedent to establish similar legislation in Canada and other jurisdictions. The Canadian Network on Corporate Accountability's **petition** to the House of Commons of Canada to adopt human rights and environmental due diligence legislation inspires hope with over 50,000 signatures acquired so far.

The time for **willful ignorance** among major retailers is over. Shifting corporations to a due diligence business model to remedy human exploitations within their seafood supply chains will require the use of critical market and policy interventions to disrupt the voluntary infrastructure that they rely on and urge accountability for all the seafood they sell.

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