

# Canadian seafood company High Liner cuts ties with supplier following forced-labour investigation

LINDSAY JONES > AND TAVIA GRANT >

PUBLISHED NOVEMBER 17, 2023

UPDATED NOVEMBER 18, 2023

Some Canadian grocery chains and food companies, including Nova Scotia-based High Liner Foods Inc., are investigating their supply chains after a team of journalists found seafood processed using forced labour in China is being shipped to the United States, Europe and Canada.

Journalism non-profit The Outlaw Ocean Project's [four-year investigation](#), published in The Globe and Mail earlier this month, said at least 10 large seafood companies in [China](#) have used more than 1,000 Uyghur workers since 2018. Seafood from these plants, it said, was purchased by major importers – including High Liner, one of the largest seafood companies in Canada and a major supplier in the U.S.

Shortly after Outlaw Ocean first published the story in early October, Lunenburg, N.S.-based High Liner launched its own investigation and cut ties with the seafood plant in China that is alleged to have used Uyghur labour. Albertsons Cos. Inc., one of the largest U.S. grocery store chains, which owns Safeway, has stopped purchasing flounder and yellow tail sole from High Liner until it completes its own investigation.

The report has sparked a wave of responses. In the U.S., it prompted a congressional hearing held last month, and a group of lawmakers is asking the Biden administration to ban seafood processed in two Chinese provinces from entering the U.S.

In the European Union, lawmakers have cited the investigation as they propose tougher regulations that address human rights abuses in the seafood industry. A number of companies in Japan, the Netherlands, the U.S. and France have dropped seafood suppliers in China, while others say they are launching investigations.

Walmart Canada told The Globe and Mail it is investigating the matter. Markham-based Sofina Foods said its U.K. division is independently conducting an investigation. Its unit, Young's Seafood, is one of the companies the report names as having links to a supplier that allegedly uses forced labour.

Other large food retailers in Canada are not following suit. Sobeys Inc. public affairs lead Sarah Dawson said the chain has a “zero-tolerance policy in our supply chain” and asked High Liner to respond further. Metro Inc. vice-president of public affairs and communications Marie-Claude Bacon said it confirmed High Liner is no longer using a facility that the report connected to forced labour.



An Outlaw Ocean investigation goes inside Chinese seafood processing plants that use state-sponsored forced labour, which supply many of the major grocery stores and restaurants across the U.S. and Europe.

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Loblaws Cos. Ltd. said its products are “absolutely not impacted,” after seeking attestations from its relevant suppliers, according to spokesperson Catherine Thomas. “We take allegations such as this extremely seriously,” said Ms. Thomas. “Since these allegations were brought to our attention we have been in communication with High Liner, and they have confirmed they are investigating.”

As for High Liner, spokesperson Jennifer Bell said it has extensively researched its supply chain, specifically its supplier Yantai Sanko Fisheries in China, in response to the investigation's allegations. She said High Liner's third-party social compliance auditors examined the supplier last December and again in August, and found no evidence of forced labour. She added that High Liner is working with non-governmental organizations and industry groups to identify opportunities for improvement in addressing forced labour.

“Out of an abundance of caution, and in light of the concerning evidence and allegations included in this article, we are no longer doing business with Yantai Sanko Fisheries,” Ms. Bell wrote in an e-mail to The Globe. “We have sourced alternate processors that are not based in China to replace the products that were previously sourced through Yantai Sanko.”

The investigation looked at human rights abuses and labour conditions in the seafood industry on land and at sea. The project's founder, journalist Ian Urbina, and his team are collaborating with dozens of media outlets, including The Globe, and the investigation was published in more than a dozen languages.

The team reviewed internal company newsletters, trade data and satellite imagery along with thousands of videos that suggest a system of forced Uyghur labour in China's seafood processing industry, which ships to Europe and North America. They said Uyghurs are recruited and rounded up before being sent, by plane or train, from Xinjiang to the coast in Shandong province in mass labour-transfer programs.

The seafood sector “has long been known to be especially problematic, because it is often labour intensive, low skilled and dangerous work, and the work sites – for instance, fishing vessels, sorting and unloading docks, fish farms, processing plants – can be very hard to enforce labour standards,” said Genevieve LeBaron, a professor at Simon Fraser University's School of Public Policy.

Despite Canada's reputation as a human rights champion, she said the country is behind others in tackling the issue. “The reality is, Canada is a serious laggard when it comes to policy to combat forced labour,” said Prof. LeBaron, whose research focuses on forced labour in modern supply chains. “The United States, many European nations, and several other countries are over a decade ahead of us on this.”

Current laws are insufficient and Canada's ban on the import of goods made with forced labour is not properly enforced, she said.

In response to the investigation, Global Affairs Canada said in a statement it expects Canadian companies operating abroad to abide by all relevant laws, to respect environmental and human rights in their operations and to adopt best practices and internationally respected guidelines on responsible business conduct, said spokesperson Charlotte MacLeod.

“Establishing that goods have been produced by forced labour requires significant research and analysis and supporting information,” wrote Ms. MacLeod. She said the Canadian Border Services Agency works closely with the federal government to identify possible sources of forced labour risk.

However, as of August, Canada has failed to intercept any such goods, according to previous Globe reporting.

Canada has introduced measures aimed at addressing human rights abuses in Xinjiang, including prohibiting imports “produced wholly or in part by forced labour.” Critics say the government has a poor record of intercepting these goods. The federal government has pledged to introduce more legislation next year to eradicate imports made with forced labour.

In 2021, the U.S. Congress passed the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act, which presumes all goods with links to China's Xinjiang region are made with forced labour, and are thus banned, unless importers can provide evidence that their products aren't made using such practices.

Canada is far behind the U.S. when it comes to blocking imports linked with forced labour, said Kayum Masimov, project manager at the Uyghur Rights Advocacy Project. “Canada is really behind – a galaxy away – from what we're supposed to do, as any responsible society and government.”

With a report from Susan Krashinsky Robertson

TERMS & CONDITIONS COMMUNITY GUIDELINES PRIVACY POLICY DISCLAIMER

SUBSCRIBE



BUSINESS SERVICES



CONTACT US



READER SERVICES



ABOUT US



© Copyright 2023 The Globe and Mail Inc. All rights reserved.

351 King Street East, Suite 1600, Toronto, ON Canada, M5A 0N1

Andrew Saunders, President and CEO

