

Biden pushed by lawmakers to step up pressure on Sysco over forced labor concerns

'We urge the Biden administration to demand that Sysco Corporation immediately sever all ties with the Chishan group and commit to improved practices to avoid being a part of the scourge of IUU fishing' -- letter from 22 US lawmakers

By [Jason Huffman](#) | Jan. 10, 2024 15:44 GMT



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US representative Jared Huffman has stepped up his attack on Sysco, leading a group of lawmakers to press president Joe Biden to cancel all federal contracts with the world's largest broadliner unless it ends its relationships with all Chinese companies involved in forced labor and illegal unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing.

"We urge the Biden administration to demand that Sysco Corporation immediately sever all ties with the Chishan group and commit to improved practices to avoid being a part of the scourge of IUU fishing. Otherwise, we request that the United States government terminate its relationship with Sysco Corporation," said 22 members of Congress in a letter sent Tuesday (Jan. 9) to the White House.

The letter is just the latest in a series of actions stemming from the two-part investigative series written by the Outlaw Ocean Project and published by [The New Yorker](#) on Oct. 9. The series, which has led to congressional hearings, multiple demands for the Biden administration to take action, and even legislation seeking an outright ban on the import of Chinese seafood, provided haunting details about crew members being held captive, beaten and suffering from malnutrition aboard vessels in China's distant water fishing fleet.

The articles also provided a thorough accounting of the Chinese program used to enlist and transport many Uyghurs over 1,000 miles from Xinjiang, in the land-locked, northwestern part of China, to seafood processing plants in Shandong, on the east coast.

Houston, Texas-based Sysco confirmed to [Undercurrent News](#) on Dec. 15 that it had ended its relationship with Shandong Haidu following allegations that the major Chinese seafood supplier was relying on forced labor. The action was an apparent response to visits to Sysco's offices and threats made by Huffman's staff.

A draft letter had been prepared for the White House by Huffman's office but was never sent due to the Sysco response, a member of Huffman's staff told [Undercurrent](#). The staffer said at the time that a different letter was being prepared for the president.

In a letter sent to Huffman on Jan. 5, Sysco president and CEO Kevin Hourican said his company is now "surveying its non-Sysco brand seafood suppliers to identify whether they have relationships with the Chishan Group or other processors named in the Ocean Outlaw report." He added: "Sysco will cease purchasing any items traced back to the Chishan Group."

Hourihan also described how Sysco requires suppliers to follow its code of conduct and grant "unrestricted access" to its facilities and records "at any time, without advance notice." For 15 years, he asserted, Sysco has "implemented an industry-leading social responsibility program."

But so far, the steps taken by Sysco have not been enough to appease the 22 lawmakers, which include two Republican delegates to the House of Representatives: Aumua Amata Coleman Radewagen of American Samoa and James Moylan of Guam.

They noted how the Chishan Group's Shandong Haidu and Rongcheng Haibo -- implicated in the Outlaw Oceans Project series -- collectively handle 30% of China's squid production and contribute to 17% of the squid exported to the US. Sysco may have severed ties to Shandong but it is among the companies still connected to Rongcheng, they said.

"Sysco does not have a direct relationship to produce Sysco brand products with Rongcheng Haibo or the other processors mentioned in Outlaw Ocean's reporting," Hourican asserted in his letter to Huffman.

However, in an email sent to [Undercurrent](#), investigative reporter Ian Urbina, the founder of the Outlaw Oceans Project, described the comment as an "intentional sidestep of responsibility" by Sysco, as the company continues to sell products coming through an intermediary, Ruggiero Seafood.

Some contracts Sysco maintains with the federal government extend until 2028 and include food distribution services that involve fish and other seafood products, the lawmakers said in their letter. The Bureau of Indian Education, Defense Logistics Agency, US Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Land Management, Department of Agriculture, Indian Health Service, US Army Corps of Engineers, Department of the Army and the Department of Veterans Affairs all depend on Sysco as a supplier of seafood, they said.

The US government has "inadvertently expended over \$200 million in the past five years on seafood associated with Uyghur labor for public food programs," the lawmakers said.

"This illustrates a systemic failure of the United States' approach to tackling IUU fishing and supply chain forced labor, as well as Sysco Corporation's internal audit and accountability procedures," the letter stated. "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."

Huffman is the ranking member of the House Natural Resources Committee's oceans panel. Another signatory on the letter is Arizona representative Raul Grijalva, the ranking member of the Natural Resources Committee.

Other US representatives to have signed the letter include: Alma Adams (North Carolina), Suzanne Bonamici (Oregon), Julia Brownley (California), Suzan DelBene (Washington), Nanette Diaz Barragan (California), Raja Krishnamoorthi (Illinois), Seth Magaziner (Rhode Island), Betty McCollum (Minnesota), James McGovern (Massachusetts), Kevin Mullin (California), Frank Pallone (New Jersey), Jimmy Panetta (California), Katie Porter (California), Scott Peters (California), Mary Sattler Peltola (Alaska) and Jennifer Wexton (Virginia). Also on the letter is Gregorio Kilili Camacho Sablan, a delegate representing the Northern Mariana Islands.

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