

Lund's, Trident, NFI respond to report spotlighting forced labor in China

'Although our investigation did not find any evidence of illegal activity or forced labor in the operations of Roncheng Haibo Seafood, we are maintaining our cessation of new business pending further investigation' -- Lund's Fisheries

By Jason Huffman | Oct. 13, 2023 22:58 BST



□ Image from Lund's Fisheries website.

Lund's Fisheries, a Cape May, New Jersey-based harvester and processor of squid, scallops and multiple finfish species, declared Friday (Oct. 13) it will not resume working with a Chinese seafood supplier identified in a special report as using forced Uyghur workers.

Lund's was one of a few big names in the US seafood industry this week to make such a dramatic pronouncement following the publication Monday (Oct. 9) in *The New Yorker* of a lengthy two-part series produced by the Outlaw Ocean Project. Many others in the industry have remained quiet.

The article, written by Outlaw Ocean founder Ian Urbina, a former Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist with the *New York Times*, provided haunting details in one article about crew members being held captive, beaten and suffering from malnutrition aboard vessels in China's distant water fishing fleet.

A second article provided a thorough account of the Chinese program used to enlist and transport a large number of Uyghurs from Xinjiang, in the land-locked, northwestern part of China, over 1,000 miles to seafood processing plants in Shangdong, on the eastern coast.

The article has generated so much attention that a joint panel of Congress and White House officials has called a special hearing to learn more about the report, as reported earlier by *Undercurrent News*.

Lund's, a vertically integrated company that operates 19 fishing vessels on the East and West Coast of the US and five seafood processing facilities in New Jersey, Massachusetts and California, was one of 98 seafood companies named in the Outlaw Ocean series. Urbina described how it sourced from Rongcheng Haibo, one of China's largest squid processors, and relied on Sedex Members Ethical Trade Audit (SMETA), a well-established third-party audit firm, to guarantee human rights were not being violated by its supplier.

Despite the clean audits Lund's said it received on Haibo, Urbina said his investigative team determined that 170 people from Xinjiang worked for the company in 2021 and a half-dozen Uyghur workers posted regularly to Douyin, the Chinese version of Tik-Tok, at Haibo throughout 2022.

Lund's said Friday it takes seriously the allegations of the type suggested in the Outlaw Ocean series, which is why it "engaged in numerous productive discussions" with the reporters beginning in January 2023. In good faith, it "conscientiously shared documentation, procedures, policies and industry knowledge surrounding domestic and international fishing, foreign processing and imports," the company said.

Also, Lund's said it responded to the questions and criticisms being raised about Haibo by initiating an internal investigation and resolved it would not renew existing contracts until that work was completed.

"Although our investigation did not find any evidence of illegal activity or forced labor in the operations of Roncheng Haibo Seafood, we are maintaining our cessation of new business pending further investigation," Lund's said.

□ Wayne and Jeff Reichle, co-owners of Lund's Fisheries. Photograph from company website.

In addition, the company said it would "continue to address Illegal, Unregulated and Unreported (IUU) fishing, and forced labor allegations with industry members, NGOs, and our government to strengthen the seafood supply chain and provide consumers with the utmost confidence."

"As a proud member of the Sustainable Fisheries Partnership's Global Squid Supply Chain Roundtable, Lund's Fisheries is committed to working towards sustainable fisheries and combatting IUU fishing and human rights violations globally," the company said.

Trident doesn't rely solely on third-party audits

Seattle, Washington-based seafood giant Trident Seafood was the other big seafood company to respond to the Outlaw Ocean special report this week.

"I want to assure you that Trident does not condone forced labor or the infringement of people's human rights," CEO Joe Bundrant said in a statement provided to *Undercurrent*. "Not in our own operations, or in those of our partners and suppliers."

Trident is not named in the special report and Bundrant assured in his statement that his company doesn't do business with any of the Chinese processing companies identified in it. He noted that while most of Trident's seafood is caught in Alaska and processed in the US, it does rely on China for some processing, including primarily its salmon.

□ Joe Bundrant, CEO of Trident Seafoods. Credit: Trident

Trident, unlike many others, doesn't rely solely on third-party audits to determine if Chinese companies meet its standards, Bundrant said. It uses its own employees in China to manage overseas operations as well as its internal local and US-based risk management teams to routinely assess Chinese processing plants.

"When processors do not meet international labor standards and our own supplier code of conduct, we cut ties and refuse to do business with them," he said, concluding: "*The New Yorker* report is a rallying cry to the industry to do better. To be better. And we're on the frontlines of leading that change."

NFI: Expanding SIMP 'makes little sense'

The National Fisheries Institute (NFI), the US seafood industry's biggest trade association, has been known to take on new regulations that make it more difficult for seafood importers, a major component of its membership.

NFI said this was the organization and its members "stand against any illegal labor and or labor abuses.

"There is no room for it in the seafood value chain and we laud efforts to expose and eradicate it. ... *The New Yorker* piece appears to illustrate the failure of certain parts of audit systems to detect what may be the use of Uyghur labor," NFI said.

However, NFI was critical of one of the changes suggested by the article. The report quoted one expert as suggesting it was time to change the scope and size of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Seafood Import Monitoring Program (SIMP). The trade group said a better answer was in amending or further enforcing the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act, signed into law in 2021.

"This conclusion is both curious and imprudent," NFI said of the suggestion contained in the article. "Using SIMP to police Chinese labor makes little sense."

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