

New Jersey lawmaker joins call for tighter scrutiny of Chinese seafood imports

'I urge CBP to enhance screening for all imported seafood from China to discourage unfair trade practices, economic coercive measures and other illegal activities' -- US representative Frank Pallone

By [Jason Huffman](#) | Dec. 6, 2023 17:47 GMT



□ The US capitol. Credit: flysnowfly / Shutterstock

US House representative Frank Pallone has joined the call for more screening of seafood products imported from China in response to recent reports about the use of forced labor.

The New Jersey Democrat hosted a press conference Monday (Dec. 4) to bring attention to the letter he sent to US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) the same day, asking the agency to better ensure compliance with international and domestic trade, safety and labor standards.

"The [Peoples Republic of China's] flagrant disregard for international and domestic laws allows China to export seafood that is often sold at low prices to establish a market advantage and drive out American seafood producers," he wrote. "The unscrutinized import of these seafood products, which are not held to the same rigorous environmental and labor standards as American seafood, harms domestic fishing industries and coastal economies.

"The United States must live up to its role as a leader in defending free and fair-trade systems based on the rule of law," he said. "Your agency has a responsibility to ensure our food imports are of the highest quality and in compliance with all applicable trade, safety, and labor standards. Any failure to do so will pose a significant threat to public health and our economic security."

The US imports about \$2 billion worth seafood annually from China.

As reported by [Undercurrent](#), Capitol Hill has been stoked up to address the issue of forced labor in the Chinese seafood industry by a two-part investigative series reported by the Outlaw Ocean Project and published in *The New Yorker* on Oct. 9.

The articles provided haunting details about crew members being held captive, beaten and suffering from malnutrition aboard vessels in China's distant water fishing fleet. They also shared a thorough accounting of the Chinese program used to enlist and transport a large number of 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.

Following a two-hour hearing by the Congressional-Executive Commission on China, which featured the investigative reporter Ian Urbina as one of four witnesses on Oct. 24, the commission's co-chairman -- representative Chris Smith, a New Jersey Republican, and senator Jeff Merkley, an Oregon Democrat -- [wrote the Department of Homeland Security](#), CBP's parent agency. They requested the issuance of withhold release orders in relation to all seafood processing facilities in Shandong and Liaoning, China. Such orders direct CBP to detain a shipment of goods over concerns related to the suspected use of forced labor.

Pallone's letter to CBP doesn't go quite that far.

"I urge CBP to enhance screening for all imported seafood from China to discourage unfair trade practices, economic coercive measures, and other illegal activities," he said. "Without proper enforcement and stepped-up screening by CBP, seafood products tainted with the use of forced labor from Chinese boats and processing centers will continue entering the US. market. Not only is this a violation of international and US law, but it also causes significant harm to American consumers and our domestic seafood industry. I request CBP provide a briefing regarding the agency's efforts to monitor seafood imported from China and guarantee compliance with international and domestic trade, safety, and labor laws."

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