

UK's Unibond purchased MSC pollock from Chinese plant accused of forced labor

The UK's largest seafood processor, Young's, has also been linked to the import of goods from plants using forced Uyghur labor via its trading with Unibond, according to the Outlaw Ocean Project

By [Louis Harkell](#) | Oct. 18, 2023 10:22 BST



□ Pollock fillets. Credit: Russian Fishery Company

UK-based seafood company Unibond Seafood International is facing allegations that forced Uyghur labor was used in a partner Chinese processing plant that supplied it Alaskan pollock fillets and loins between 2019 and 2022, according to a report by the Outlaw Ocean Project (OOP).

The report states that Unibond's partner supplier, Qingdao Tianyuan, employed coerced labor from China's Uyghur ethnic minority. Excerpts from bills of ladings show Qingdao Tianyuan supplied the pollock to Unibond's subsidiary Qingdao Unibond Premium Seafood Processing. The shipments occurred between late September and October 2019.

Unibond, which reported turnover of £143.9 million (\$177m) in 2022, is a major supplier to Europe and the US of frozen whitefish and salmon processed in China. Customers include UK-based Fastnet Fish, and US companies F.W. Bryce, High Liner Foods USA, Southstream Seafood, Aquastar USA and Gortons, according to OOP.

Jason Parsons of Unibond told OOP the company was "very surprised to learn of allegations" against Qingdao Tianyuan, which accounted for around 1% of Unibond's supply base, he said. Qingdao Tianyuan has denied the accusations, Parsons said.

Parsons did not respond to a request for comment from *Undercurrent News* about the shipments.

The excerpts from bills of ladings seen by *Undercurrent* show Qingdao Tianyuan supplied 750 metric tons of Alaskan pollock fillets and loins to Qingdao Unibond Premium Seafood Processing between late September and October 2019. The pollock was certified sustainable by the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC).

The consignments -- delivered in three shipments of 20 containers -- arrived in Le Havre, France, a major terminal for Chinese container ships and a distribution node in Europe. The first consignment of 241.3t of frozen MSC pollock fillets arrived on Sept. 22, 2019. The second and third consignments arrived on Oct. 31 with 305.5t and 204.3t of frozen MSC Alaskan pollock loins and fillets, respectively.

Further shipments totaling 555t took place in 2021 and 2022, also to Le Havre, as well to Macau, China.

These are the only excerpts of bills of lading *Undercurrent* has seen so far, meaning there could be additional shipments. The volume of shipments reported in the excerpts of bills of lading may also vary from the actual amount of traded product.

Unibond operates two seafood processing subsidiaries in China -- Unibond Qingdao Premium Seafood Processing and Qingdao UZP Foods Processing, both in Shandong, according to its website.

Parsons emphasized to OOP that none of the above-mentioned customers were supplied seafood from Qingdao Tianyuan, although due to customer confidentiality, Unibond could not share specifics.

Young's investigation ongoing

Unibond wasn't the only UK-based company linked to the issues in China. The UK's largest processor, Young's Seafood, was linked by OOP to seafood imported from the factories in question via Unibond.

Young's Seafood told OOP it was carrying out an internal investigation back in July and August.

It told the report's investigators:

"Young's Seafood take any allegations of forced or illegal labor within our supply chain extremely seriously. We are currently undertaking our own investigation. We are active members of the Seafood Ethics Action Alliance, a collaboration of retailers and seafood businesses which aims to strengthen human rights due diligence in the global seafood supply chain and ensure respect for human rights."

□ OOP's initial contact with Young's, via PR Aberfield, outlining its links

"Through this, we are involved in a range of activities which seek to improve labor standards in the seafood sector. These include ensuring effective due diligence and effective protection of human rights."

Its public relations firm, Aberfield Communications, told OOP that work could take some time given the "level of complexity involved in this type of investigation when the processing facility in question is in China."

"Young's is in the process of talking to suppliers to find out further information in order to verify the claims you have made to us. However, if you can share any information or evidence behind the claims that would help greatly in expediting the process."

Upon receipt of OOP's methodology, the PR firm added that its claims of complexity was "around the evidence of forced labor, not around the supply."

"What you have provided is a good start, but the sharing of the evidence you have mentioned -- not just the methods you have used -- would be hugely helpful in assisting with our investigations," it added.

When OOP declined to share specifics, Young's said the publishing of the final report would aid in its own further investigations.

"We will provide further updates in due course as this develops. We are continuing to work alongside Seafood Ethics Action Alliance, Food Network for Ethical Trade (FNET) and the wider industry to address this very important issue, which affects not just the seafood industry, but all areas of manufacturing."

Aberfield also stressed to OOP that it is not a spokesperson for Young's, and that it would be "factually incorrect" to quote the firm as a spokesperson.

When contacted for any further comment by *Undercurrent*, Young's reiterated the official statement above.

Uyghur labor scandal

The allegations of forced labor in some Chinese plants have shaken the seafood industry in Europe and the US, which relies heavily on China for filleting and processing.

Companies like Unibond have built successful businesses around the low-cost labor in the Asian country, where filleting and processing large volumes of whole frozen fish imported from places like Russia, Europe and North America employs thousands. But this trade model is facing increased scrutiny amid the allegations.

On Friday (Oct. 13), Lund's Fisheries, a Cape May, New Jersey-based harvester and processor of squid, scallops and multiple finfish species, [declared it will not resume working](#) with a Chinese seafood supplier identified in OOP's report.

Lund's was one of a few big names in the US seafood industry last week to make such a pronouncement following the publication in *The New Yorker* of the lengthy two-part series produced in collaboration with OOP. Another large US retailer, Albertsons Companies, also said it had [dropped two products from High Liner](#), including branded flounder and yellowfin sole, having been contacted by OOP.

High Liner has also since ceased working with the Chinese supplier accused of employing forced Uyghur labor.

The investigation 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 by Undercurrent](#).

Contact the author louis.harkell@undercurrentnews.com

News	About	Subscriptions	Facebook
Data	Contact	Newsletters	Twitter
Webinars	Advertise	Jobs	LinkedIn
Blogs	Archive		
Interviews			