

US lawmakers ask Biden administration to block seafood from two Chinese provinces

'The evidence presented by the Outlaw Ocean Project and detailed in the New Yorker and other publications globally is compelling and well-documented' -- representative Chris Smith and senator Jeff Merkley

By [Jason Huffman](#) | Oct. 25, 2023 17:47 BST



□ The US Capitol building in Washington, D.C. Credit: Vlad G/ Shutterstock.com

The two US lawmakers who led a hearing this week to discuss an investigative report about the use of forced Uyghur labor in the Chinese seafood industry are now asking the president Joe Biden administration to halt imports from seafood-processing facilities in two Chinese provinces.

In a letter sent Tuesday (Oct. 24) to US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) secretary Alejandro Mayorkas, representative Chris Smith, a New Jersey Republican, and senator Jeff Merkley, an Oregon Democrat, request the issuances of withhold release orders (WROs) in relation to all seafood processing facilities in Shandong and Liaoning. Such orders direct DHS's Customs and Border Protection to detain a shipment of goods over concerns related to the suspected use of forced labor.

Earlier in the day, Smith and Merkley chaired a nearly two-hour hearing by the Congressional-Executive Commission on China to review a two-part reporting series by the Outlaw Ocean Project (OOP) that was published Oct. 9 in *The New Yorker*. As reported by [Undercurrent News](#), the hearing featured four witnesses, including Ian Urbina, the former 17-year *New York Times* journalist who wrote the articles as the founder and director of the OOP.

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.

Additionally, during the hearing, the commission heard from Greg Scarlatoiu, executive director of the Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, regarding the use of North Korean workers in plants in Liaoning.

"The evidence presented by the Outlaw Ocean Project and detailed in the *New Yorker* and other publications globally is compelling and well-documented," the two lawmakers wrote in their letter to Mayorkas.

"Major wholesalers, restaurants, grocery chains, food service companies and the US government all import large amounts of seafood from the processing plants in Shandong and Liaoning. From the fish sticks served at school lunches to the fish sandwiches and calamari sold at major restaurants and grocery chains, the plates of American consumers are filled with products likely tainted with forced labor. At the very least, we should all agree that American veterans, school children and men and women in uniform should not be unwitting accomplices to egregious human rights abuses."

Smith and Merkley called for the Biden administration to add seafood businesses involved in using Uyghur forced labor to a ban list created under the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act (UFLPA), a law passed in late 2021.

The request follows another letter sent Oct. 20 by US representatives Raul Grijalva and Jared Huffman to CBP commissioner Troy Miller, asking him to better enforce UFLPA against Chinese seafood coming into the US from processing plants caught using forced Uyghur labor, as reported by [Undercurrent](#).

At least one member of the Biden administration can be expected to support the kind of tough steps advocated by lawmakers. Thea Lee, deputy undersecretary for international affairs at the Labor Department and a member of the commission, said at the hearing that "further urgent action is needed."

Contact the author jason.huffman@undercurrentnews.com

News

About

Subscriptions

Facebook

Data

Contact

Newsletters

Twitter

Webinars

Advertise

Jobs

LinkedIn

Blogs

Archive

Interviews