

# US lawmakers press White House to address China forced labor in advance of WTO discussion

'The current Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies does not explicitly address a number of unfair practices, including the use of forced labor in seafood supply chains' -- Letter from 12 lawmakers to Biden administration

By [Jason Huffman](#) | Feb. 22, 2024 16:50 GMT



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A dozen US lawmakers have asked several prominent members of the president Joe Biden administration to address reports of forced labor abuses in the Chinese seafood harvesting and processing industries in advance of the upcoming World Trade Organization (WTO) meeting.

The lawmakers, led by representatives Jimmy Panetta, a California Democrat, and Michelle Steel, a California Republican, sent [a three-page letter](#) Friday (Feb. 16) to secretary of state Tony Blinken, US trade representative Katherine Tai and US customs and border commissioner Troy Miller.

"To complement the negotiations and demonstrate the commitment of the United States to combatting unfair fishing practices more broadly," they suggest the use of sanctions already provided by Congress, including the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act, in advance of the WTO's 13th Ministerial Conference (MC13). The event is scheduled for Feb. 26-29 in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates.

Customs and Border Protection should consider potential withhold release orders, a tool for blocking shipments at the ports, they said.

The letter is just the latest of many responses on Capitol Hill to a special investigative report by the group calling itself the Outlaw Ocean Project that was published on Oct. 9 in [The New Yorker](#). The group, led by Ian Urbina, a former 17-year journalist for the *New York Times* and the winner of a Pulitzer Prize, reported haunting details about crew members being held captive, beaten and suffering from malnutrition aboard vessels in China's distant water fishing fleet.

The series provided 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 Shangdong, on the east coast. It led to [a hearing by the Congressional-Executive Commission on China \(CECC\)](#) and multiple requests made of the Biden administration, in addition to several bills intended to put pressure on China.

Nearly 90% of the planet's fish stocks are fully exploited, overexploited or depleted, the lawmakers said in their letter, calling China the world's worst offender.

"[T]here is mounting evidence that Chinese seafood companies -- allegedly including Yantai Sanko Fisheries, Yantai Longwin Foods, the Chishan Group, Shandong Meijia Group, Qingdao Tianyuan Aquatic Foodstuffs, and the Rongsense Group -- are complicit in, or directly responsible for, forced labor by Uyghurs or other minority populations from the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region," the lawmakers said.

The seafood produced by and imported from these companies could "taint US seafood supply chains" and show up in US grocery stores and retail outlets, they warned.

"In the coming weeks, countries will meet at MC13, where a critical topic will be addressing harmful fishing subsidies," the lawmakers continued. "WTO members will discuss urgent work toward entry into force of the 2022 WTO Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies, while also considering expansion of the current agreement to address a broader range of harmful subsidies in this sector.

"... Fisheries subsidies are a human rights threat as well," they stated. "The current Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies does not explicitly address a number of unfair practices, including the use of forced labor in seafood supply chains. To complement negotiations and demonstrate the commitment of the United States to combatting unfair fishing practices more broadly, the United States should take available unilateral action to address identified instances of unfair fishing practices, such as forced labor."

Other representatives to sign the letter included Democrats Earl Blumenauer (Oregon), Terri Sewell (Alabama), Suzan DelBene (Washington), Daniel Kildee (Michigan), Bradley Scott Schneider (Colorado), Mike Thompson (California), Linda Sanchez (California) and Jimmy Gomez (California). Republicans Darin LaHood (Illinois) and Gregory Steube (Florida) also signed.

All are members of the important House Ways and Means Committee.

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