

US retail giant drops High Liner products linked to Chinese supplier allegedly using forced Uyghur labor

High Liner has also dropped China's Yantai Sanko as a supplier, Jennifer Bell, vice president of corporate communications, told Undercurrent News on Wednesday

By Tom Seaman | Oct. 11, 2023 15:54 BST



□ One of High Liner Food's value-added products that are helping to boost frozen sales.

One of the largest retailers in the US, Albertsons Companies, has dropped two products from High Liner Foods after allegations of the use of forced Uyghur labor by a Chinese supplier the latter has since ceased working with.

The retail giant stopped buying High Liner branded flounder and yellowfin sole, having been contacted by NGO The Outlaw Ocean project, which is investigating the use of Uyghur workers in seafood plants in China's Shandong province. The persecution of the Muslim Uyghurs, China's largest ethnic minority group, has led the US Congress to ban importing any products that can be tied to implicated suppliers.

A spokesperson for the retail giant confirmed to Outlaw Ocean that the move applies to all its brands across the US, including Acme Markets, Albertsons, Safeway and Shaw's. Although based in Canada, High Liner generates around two-thirds of its \$1 billion-plus sales from US retailers like Albertsons.

According to Outlaw Ocean, plants such as Yantai Sanko Fisheries -- a High Liner supplier until being dropped recently -- have taken on Uyghur workers under the Chinese government's labor transfer program. The United Nations and human rights organizations consider this to be forced labor.

At least a thousand Uyghurs have been sent to work in seafood-processing factories in Shandong province, where seafood hubs Qingdao and Yantai are located, since 2018, according to the [Outlaw Ocean report published on Oct. 9](#). Although workers are paid, they are given little to no choice in the process and are under strict state supervision, according to reporting from Outlaw Ocean.

High Liner has dropped Yantai Sanko as a supplier, Jennifer Bell, vice president of corporate communications, told *Undercurrent News* on Wednesday, Oct. 11.

"Out of an abundance of caution, and in light of the concerning evidence and allegations included in this article, we are no longer doing business with Yantai Sanko Fisheries. High Liner Foods is working with alternate suppliers to ensure that we minimize the impact on our supply chain," wrote Bell in a written statement.

"High Liner Foods takes these allegations very seriously and requires strict adherence to our Supplier Code of Conduct as part of our supplier approval process. Upon receiving initial contact from Outlaw Ocean, we researched the claims extensively across our Supply Chain and specifically with our supplier Yantai Sanko Fisheries in China. Yantai Sanko was audited by our third-party social compliance auditors as part of our regular supplier audit process in December 2022," she added.

After hearing of the allegations brought forward by Outlaw Ocean, High Liner had Yantai Sanko audited again in August 2023, finding no evidence in either audit of the use of forced labor, she said.

Albertsons continues "to be a valued customer, and it is our company policy not to offer comment regarding operational matters related to any customers," Bell told *Undercurrent*.

In July and August, Outlaw Ocean sent emails to Albertsons, detailing connections between High Liner and Yantai Sanko and Yantai Longwin Food, another Chinese whitefish supplier to the Canada-based processor, which had allegedly used Uyghur forced labor.

"Albertsons Cos. is committed to providing our customers with high-quality and traceable seafood from environmentally and socially responsible sources, and we take these allegations very seriously," Sarah Holland, senior director of communications at Albertsons, responded to Outlaw Ocean on Aug. 29. The full dialogue has been open sourced by Outlaw Ocean and [can be seen here](#).

"We expect our suppliers to adopt and comply with comprehensive, transparent and verifiable supply chains that are free of human trafficking and forced labor. We are thoroughly investigating these claims, and in light of High Liner Foods' ties to one of the alleged fisheries, we have made the decision to stop purchases of flounder and yellowtail [presumably yellowfin] sole from this supplier. At the conclusion of our investigation, we will reevaluate our position."

On Sept. 1, Holland clarified the move applies to all the "company's retail banners."

The company "will not be pulling" the products from shelves, said Holland.

"The product is safe for consumption, and consciously discarding it would increase food waste going to landfills, another important issue."

Albertsons "is always working to improve transparency within our seafood supply chain; to protect the oceans; and to provide fair and equitable treatment for the people who depend on them for their livelihoods," she said.

The chain continues to "collaborate with FishWise, who also serves other large retailers in the US, and third-party auditors (beyond SMETA) to identify potential issues, enhance best practices and implement change to reduce human trafficking and forced labor risks in seafood supply chains, which may include both announced and unannounced audits in challenging areas, including China."

SMETA, or the Sedex Members Ethical Trade Audit, is an ethical audit methodology that claims to encompass "all aspects of responsible business practice."

Holland was not immediately available for further comment to *Undercurrent*.

US ban

Products produced in China "wholly or in part" by workers in Xinjiang or by ethnic minorities from the region have been banned from entering the US since 2021 [when Congress passed the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act \(UFLPA\)](#).

According to Outlaw Ocean, the UFLPA law had a major impact. Since June of last year, US Customs and Border Protection has detained more than \$1 billion worth of goods connected to Xinjiang, including electronics, clothing, and pharmaceuticals.

The seafood sector has, until now, largely escaped notice, however. "Shandong Province, a major seafood-processing hub along the eastern coast of China, is more than a thousand miles away from Xinjiang -- which may have helped it evade scrutiny," states the Outlaw Ocean report.

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