

‘We had expected to have come further’: World’s largest seafood firms disappointed by supply chain reports

SeaBOS says it's 'frustrated' by recent reports linking companies to forced labor in China and by a new World Benchmarking Alliance report that found a 'concerning lack of transparency around progress towards their sustainability commitments'

By [Neil Ramsden](#) | Oct. 18, 2023 15:40 BST



□ Seafood market. Credit: WBA

SeaBOS -- a collection of the world's largest seafood companies -- has told *Undercurrent News* of its disappointment over recent reports linking major firms to accusations of forced labor in China.

An investigation by the Outlaw Ocean Project, published in *The New Yorker*, has linked numerous suppliers and retailers in Europe and the US to factories in Shandong province accused of using forced Uyghur labor transferred from Xinjiang. [Eleven of the plants](#) carried the Marine Stewardship Council chain-of-custody certificate.

Then, on Oct. 17, the World Benchmarking Alliance (WBA) unveiled a report in which it assessed 30 of the most influential global seafood companies, finding "a concerning lack of transparency around progress towards their sustainability commitments."

"While it is encouraging that the vast majority of companies source at least some of their seafood from operations that are sustainable or improving, since 2021, less than a third of companies have increased their sustainable seafood provision," WBA said.

Martin Exel, managing director of SeaBOS, told *Undercurrent* the report on Chinese seafood supply chains and findings from the WBA "represent important sources of information for the seafood industry, including for SeaBOS companies."

He continued: "The seafood sector can, and must, do better. It is problematic and disappointing that a) the report includes information about SeaBOS members and b) that our members do not score better in the WBA index in this edition. We have worked hard on e.g., addressing the risk of IUU fishing and labor abuse, improving traceability and transparency, in collaboration with science since 2017.

"All SeaBOS members have engaged with the SSI [Seafood Stewardship Index] since 2018. We had expected to have come further than this, but clearly much more work remains."

SeaBOS members have piloted the use of new technologies and utilized new risk assessment approaches, and the level of transparency among some firms has substantially increased, he said.

"Our results are far from perfect," he acknowledged, but said its [new impact report](#) illustrated that all the members are acting and committed to further

□ Credit: WBA

action.

He told *Undercurrent* the organization had just held its annual CEO meeting, where the Chinese seafood supply chain report and findings from the WBA were discussed.

"These findings, although frustrating, are encouraging us to work harder. It has also strengthened our commitment to advocate for stronger policy measures."

For instance, its CEOs have called on the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation, or APEC, to endorse a call to action to combat illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing in the Pacific.

"In turn, and in the context of APEC prioritization of public-private partnerships to achieve lasting food security across the Pacific region, we commit to using our best efforts to support and complement APEC efforts against IUU fishing and modern slavery through our own actions," [SeaBOS has said](#).

Regarding forced, bonded, or child labor, or IUU fishing in supply chains, SeaBOS members in 2020 committed to "act swiftly and transparently on any evidence that these activities exist within our operations and/or supply chains," he noted.

"Although we would hope that these things would not appear in our supply chains, such incidents also represent an opportunity to learn. I am confident the members will address any evidence of issues raised in connection to their operations from the report on Chinese seafood supply chains, and that addressing them in an honest and transparent manner will help drive the kind of change that these systemic problems require."

WBA: Progress 'slow and insufficient'

The WBA report in question is the third iteration of its Seafood Stewardship Index and can be found [here](#).

"While WBA has seen minor improvements in human right due diligence (HRDD), companies increasing their share of sustainable seafood, and some moves towards implementing the Global Dialogue for Seafood Traceability (GDST) standards, the progress on average has been slow and insufficient," the report said.

□ Credit: WBA

"The seafood industry requires more transparency in order to create healthier marine ecosystems."

The research found that seafood companies need to set credible targets and report progress more transparently. Only 16% of assessed companies have set credible targets across environmental, traceability and social issues, it said. Less than a quarter have the ambitious target of sourcing 100% of their seafood from environmentally sustainable sources and report progress towards this goal.

It is estimated that 20% of the world's catches originate from IUU fishing, but only three benchmarked companies assess IUU risks in their operations and supply chain, and none disclose the results of their risk assessments, it found.

"Companies' first priority should be assessing their risk and impacts," said Helen Packer, WBA's SII lead. "Currently, many still don't seem to know their impacts. Understanding impacts, however, is key to inform decisions towards actions that will lead to a fairer and more sustainable future. Businesses should then focus on being able to trace their seafood products from boat to plate to ensure they are legally caught, ethically produced and environmentally sustainable."

A growing number of companies are committing to traceability, she noted. "For these commitments to carry weight, businesses must be more transparent about how they are implemented. Less than a third of companies disclose information about the traceability systems they have in place, and only four businesses demonstrate that they are actively working towards implementing globally recognized traceability standards."

The seafood industry must act faster, and stakeholders must hold companies to account, she added.

Nine of the 30 companies WBA assessed -- three-and-a-half times more than in 2021 -- have started to implement HRDD, but most companies have not made any progress in this area, WBA said. "These companies urgently need to put people at the center of their transition to ensure no one is left behind."

Thai Union continues to strive

Thai Union Group -- one of those assessed by WBA and a member of SeaBOS -- noted it had been ranked number one on the SSI for the third consecutive time "in recognition of its leadership in driving positive change and delivering towards the United Nations sustainable development goals."

The WBA said that Thai Union was measured as being first in social responsibility for "distinguishing itself from its peers by its efforts to ensure decent working and living conditions on board fishing vessels, whilst monitoring for compliance and providing evidence of improvements."

CEO Thiraphong Chansiri said his company wanted to be "the most trusted seafood leader in the world."

"We recognize that to achieve our vision, we must deliver impactful change across not only our own operations but across our global sourcing footprint. We're proud of what we have achieved in driving positive change while acknowledging that there are many challenges ahead. Thai Union remains deeply committed to the ongoing pursuit of programs and initiatives that deliver positive outcomes for both people and planet."

Adam Brennan, chief sustainability officer at Thai Union, said that with a score of 47.5 out of 100, it was clear that Thai Union and the rest of the industry still have "immense challenges ahead."

SSI said Thai Union still has room for improvement, including in environmental areas, by demonstrating how it mitigates ecosystem impacts across 100% of its operations.

Contact the author neil.ramsden@undercurrentnews.com

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