

# Outlaw Ocean report in Politico takes aim at US government purchases of seafood from China

The US government is among the largest institutional buyers of seafood, purchasing more than \$400 million worth in 2022

By Jason Huffman | Nov. 21, 2023 17:32 GMT



From the cover of the Politico Magazine article "How the U.S. Violates Its Own Trade Laws to Buy Seafood from China," published Nov. 21, 2023.

The journalist behind the *New Yorker* article that caused the US Congress and White House to focus more attention recently on the use of forced labor in the Chinese commercial fish and seafood processing sectors has struck again.

In "How the US Violates Its Own Trade Laws to Buy Seafood from China," a lengthy article published Tuesday (Nov. 21) by *Politico Magazine*, Ian Urbina, the founder of the Outlaw Ocean Project (OOP), focuses on the amount of seafood purchased by or with help from the US government, some of which was sourced from China, sometimes despite rules intended to block such imports and acquisitions.

OOP's earlier [two-part series](#), published by the *New Yorker* on Oct. 9, provided haunting details about crew members being held captive, beaten and suffering from malnutrition aboard vessels in China's distant water fishing fleet. It also shared a thorough accounting of the Chinese program used to enlist and transport many Uyghurs from Xinjiang, in the land-locked, northwestern part of China, over 1,000 miles to seafood processing plants in Shangdong, on the eastern coast.

The articles resulted in a nearly two-hour, four-witness hearing by the Congressional-Executive Commission on China (CECC) on Oct. 24 and multiple letters by lawmakers calling for the president Joe Biden administration to step up its efforts to block the import of Chinese seafood, as reported by [Undercurrent News](#).

In Urbina's latest report for *Politico*, he noted how his reporting team used "bills of lading and other customs information, product packaging and company press releases and annual reports to track the seafood to grocery stores, restaurants and food service companies in Europe and the United States, and federal contracts databases to tie imported seafood -- everything from pollock to salmon to haddock -- to American and European government purchasing."

The US government is among the largest institutional buyers of seafood, purchasing more than \$400 million in 2022, he noted.

"The investigation found that a portion of this spending goes toward importers that source fish from processing plants using Uyghur labor, in violation of the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act, which was passed almost unanimously in December 2021, and requires US Customs and Border Protection to block the import of goods produced by Muslim Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities from Xinjiang province," he wrote.

OOP said its investigation found more than \$50m worth of salmon supplied to federally funded soup kitchens and programs to feed low-income elders by importers that source from plants using Uyghur labor. Also, more than \$20m worth of pollock was shipped to the National School Lunch Program and other federal food assistance programs, most of it as fish sticks.

The US donated over \$300,000 worth of canned pink salmon to Ukraine to support the war effort, some of it supplied by OBI Seafoods, which, OOP said it found in its investigation, sources from a Chinese plant using Uyghurs. OOP said OBI did not respond to requests for comment.

US government purchases have drastically increased since the global pandemic, the article noted, as seafood trade associations have lobbied federal officials to help the industry's financial losses.

Urbina's latest article also touches on the Seafood Import Monitoring Program (SIMP), launched in 2016 as part of an effort by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) to stop the US from importing illegal, unreported and unregulated seafood. SIMP requirements are limited to 13 species, not including any species of squid, among those for which forced labor is common in China, according to OOP.

NOAA recently withdrew its proposal to expand SIMP to include squid, among other species, as reported by [Undercurrent](#).

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