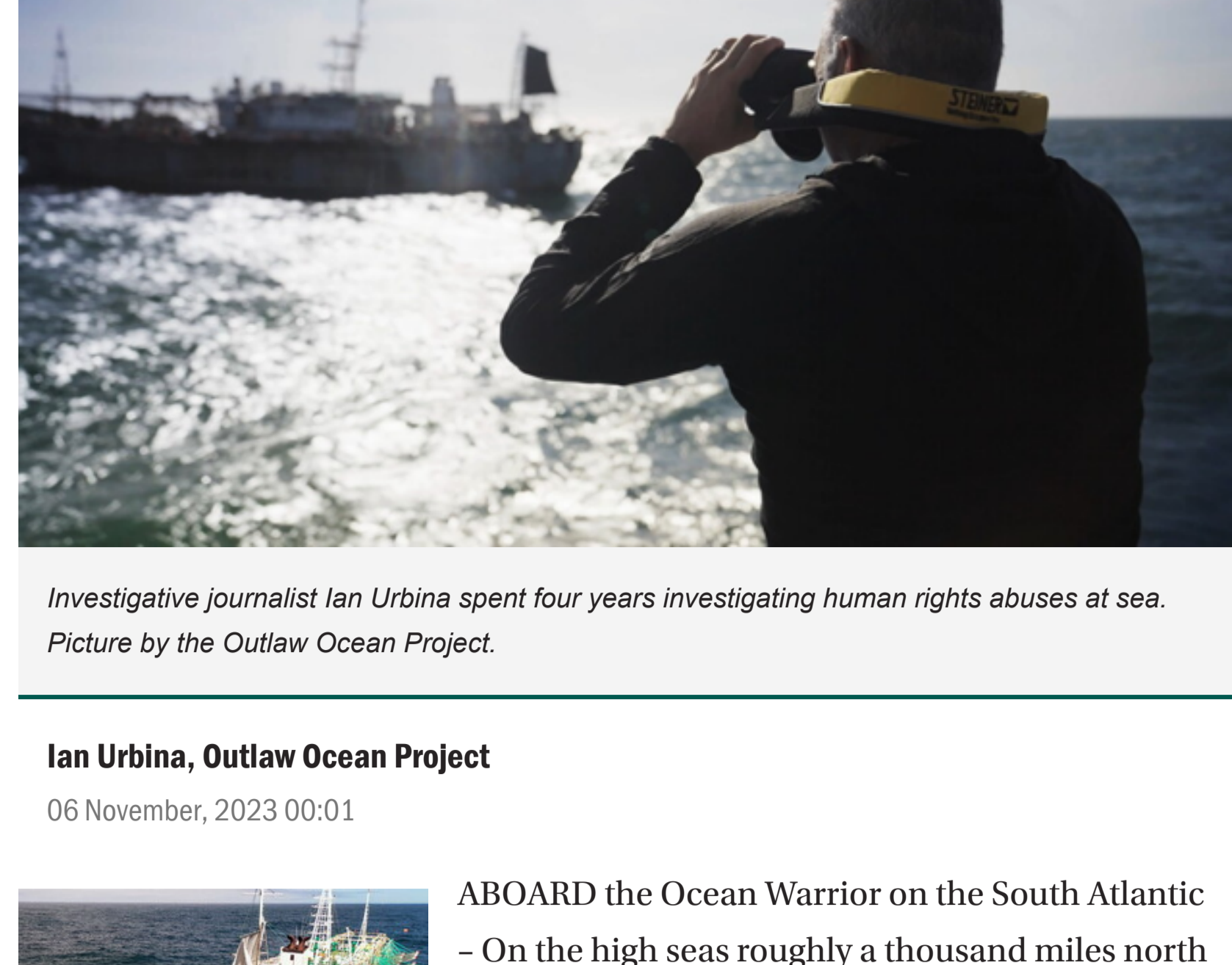
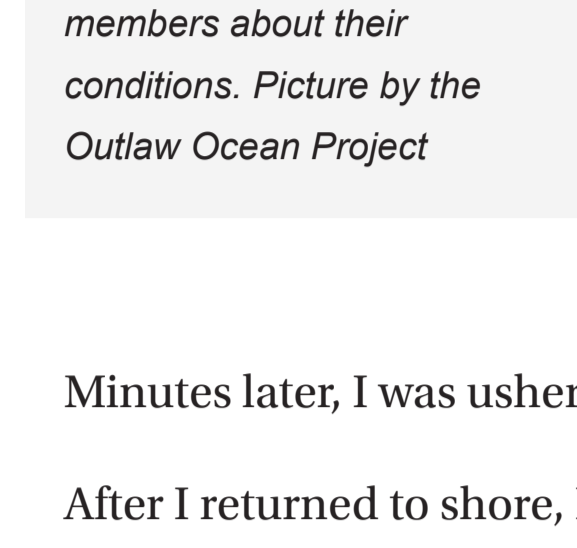


Ocean Outlaws - How a four year investigation linking fish sold in Irish supermarkets to human rights abuses at sea was conducted



Investigative Journalist Ian Urbina spent four years investigating human rights abuses at sea. Picture by the Outlaw Ocean Project.

Ian Urbina, Outlaw Ocean Project
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A documentary team from the Outlaw Ocean Project board a Chinese fishing vessel to interview crew members about their conditions. Picture by the Outlaw Ocean Project

ABOARD the Ocean Warrior on the South Atlantic – On the high seas roughly a thousand miles north of the Falkland Islands, an 18-year-old deckhand working on a Chinese squid ship nervously ducked into a dark hallway to whisper his plea for help. “Our passports were taken,” he said to me.

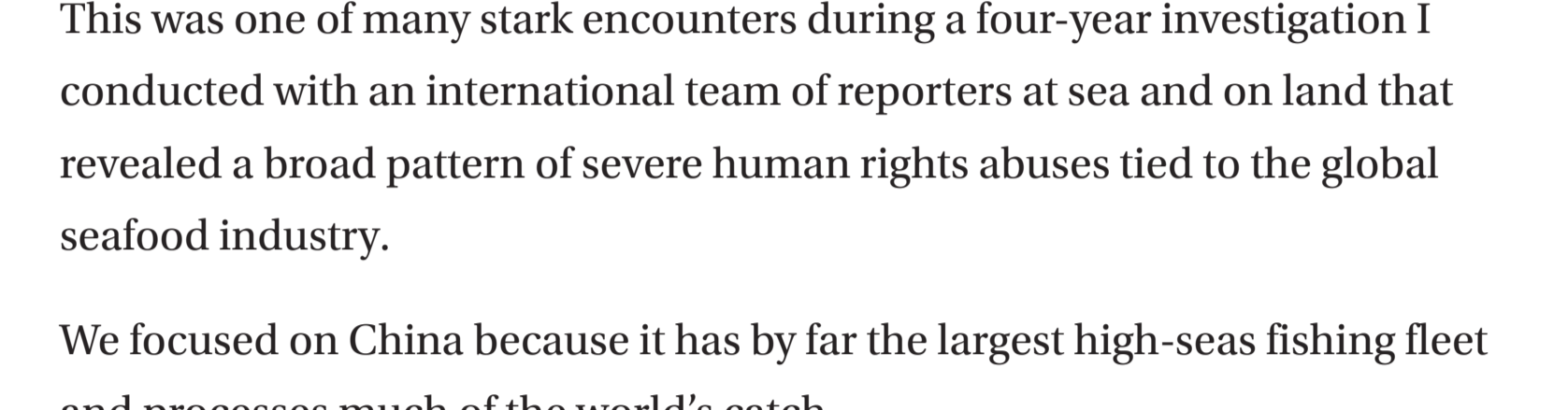
“They won’t give them back.” Instead of speaking more, he then began typing on his cell phone, for fear of being overheard.

“Can you take us to the embassy in Argentina?” Just then, my minder rounded the corner and the deckhand abruptly walked away.

Minutes later, I was ushered off the ship.

After I returned to shore, I contacted his family. “My heart really aches,” his older sister, a math teacher in Fujian, China, said, after hearing of her brother’s plea for help.

Her family had begged him not to go to sea, but he was drawn to the idea of seeing other countries.



How the investigation was conducted. An explanation of how a team of journalists from The Outlaw Ocean Project produced a four-year investigation of forced labour and other crimes tied to the Chinese fleet and the world’s seafood supply.

She hadn’t known that he was being held captive, and felt helpless to stop it. “He’s really too young,” she said.

“And now there is nothing we can do, because he’s so far away.”

This was one of many stark encounters during a four-year investigation I conducted with an international team of reporters at sea and on land that revealed a broad pattern of severe human rights abuses tied to the global seafood industry.

We focused on China because it has by far the largest high-seas fishing fleet and processes much of the world’s catch.

The investigation documented cases of debt bondage, wage withholding, excessive working hours, beatings of deckhands, passport confiscation, prohibiting timely access to medical care, and deaths from violence on hundreds of Chinese fishing ships.

Data from just one port—Montevideo, Uruguay—showed that for much of the past decade, one dead body has been disembarked there per month, mostly from Chinese fishing ships.

The State Department and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration both named China among countries most likely to engage in illegal labour practices in the seafood sector, yet in the U.S., half of the fish sticks served in public schools have been processed in China, according to a study by the Genuine Alaska Pollock Producers.

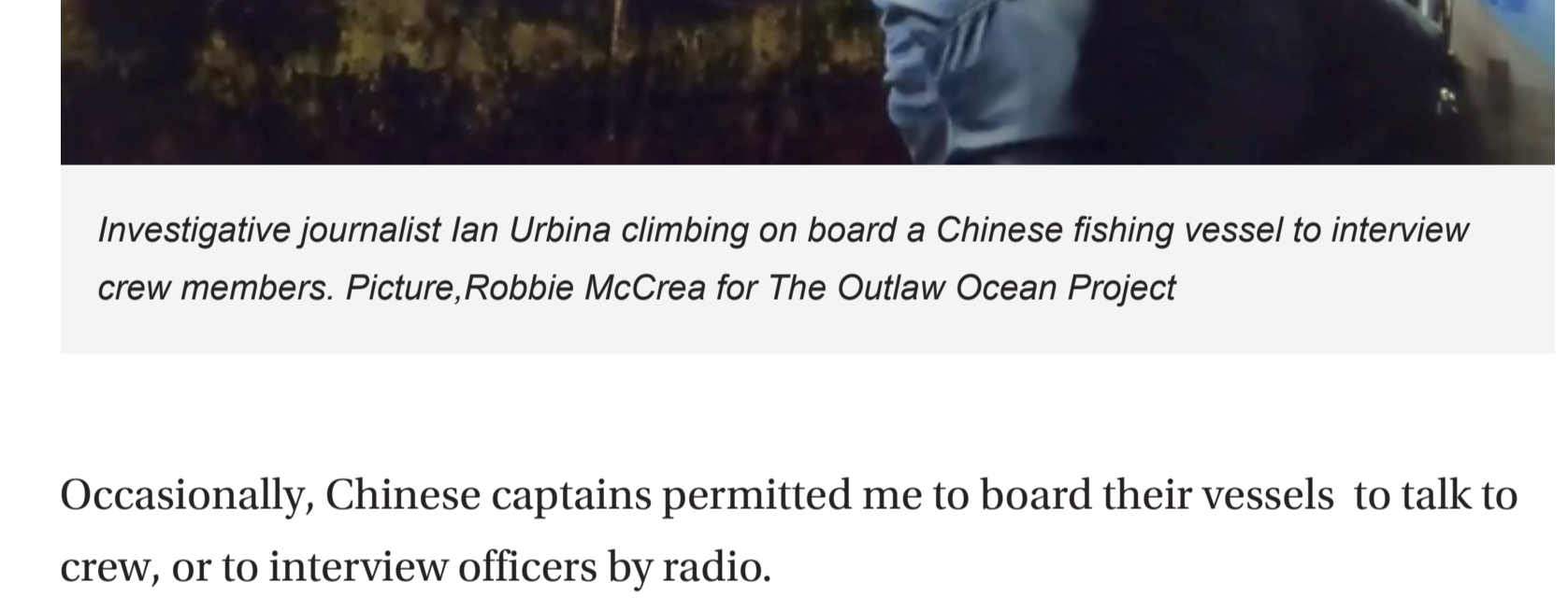


Investigative journalist Ian Urbina preparing to throw a bottle containing interview questions on to a Chinese fishing vessel. Picture by Picture by James Glancy for the Outlaw Ocean Project

Our reporting revealed Chinese vessels illegally entering the waters of other countries, disabling locational transponders in violation of Chinese law, breaking U.N. sanctions that prohibit foreigners fishing in North Korean waters, transmitting dual identities (or “spoofing”), shark finning of protected species, fishing without a license, and using prohibited gear.

More than one hundred Chinese squid ships were found to have fished illegally, including by dumping excess catch back into the sea. Journalists, especially from the West, are rarely, if ever, permitted aboard Chinese ships.

To get a glimpse into this world, my team and I visited China’s fishing ships in their largest fishing grounds: near the Galapagos Islands; near the Falkland Islands; off the Coast of Gambia; and in the Sea of Japan, near Korea.



Investigative journalist Ian Urbina climbing on board a Chinese fishing vessel to interview crew members. Picture, Robbie McCrea for The Outlaw Ocean Project

Occasionally, Chinese captains permitted me to board their vessels to talk to crew, or to interview officers by radio.

In many cases, the ships got spooked, pulling up their gear and fleeing the scene. “Don’t talk to these guys!” a Chinese captain yelled at another officer who was speaking to us over the radio.

When this happened, we trailed the ships in a smaller and faster skiff to get close enough to throw aboard plastic bottles weighed down with rice and containing a pen, cigarettes, hard candy, and interview questions.

On several occasions, the deckhands quickly wrote their replies, often providing phone numbers for family back home, and then tossed the bottles back into the water.

After returning to shore in foreign ports, we contacted families of the workers and interviewed several dozen additional former and current crew.

Getting onto these ships was essential not just to hear from crew, including some that said they were being held against their will, but also to experience first-hand the gritty conditions on board. Many deckhands spend over two years at sea without ever touching land or communicating with their families, and they work long shifts that often last more than twelve hours.



A documentary team from the Outlaw Ocean Project board a Chinese fishing vessel to interview crew members about their conditions. Picture by the Outlaw Ocean Project

Some contract beriberi, a disease caused by deficiencies in vitamin B1, also known as thiamine, and often induced by diets consisting mainly of foods such as white rice or instant noodles, which are low in this vitamin.

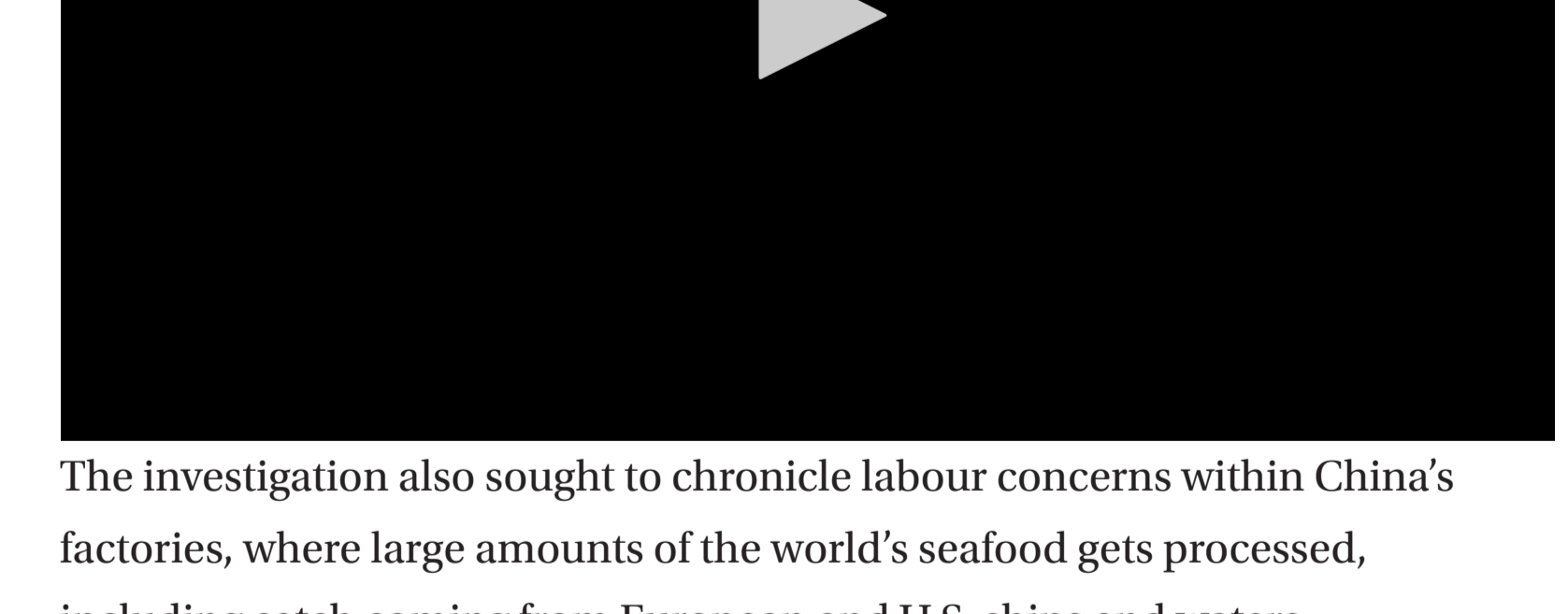
The disease, fatal if left untreated, has historically appeared in prisons, asylums, and migrant camps, but it has largely been stamped out.

Experts say that when it occurs at sea, beriberi often indicates criminal neglect because it is so easily treatable and avoidable. Ships often quickly run out of fresh fruit or vegetables, and conditions on board are filthy. The setting can feel surreal.

Virtually every surface is covered in oozy ink, and the decks are showered through the night in bright light from bowling ball-sized bulbs that are used to attract squid to the surface of the water.

Before Covid-19, Chinese fishing ships often used Indonesian deckhands, but with the global lockdowns in response to the pandemic, captains shifted to primarily Chinese crews.

Court records offered a rare window into the problem of Chinese-on-Chinese labour abuse, including the trafficking of workers, typically from poorer inland regions of the country. Labour contracts provided by former deckhands from fishing ships and online advertisements posted by recruiters showed how the unwitting and desperate are often targeted in schemes that amount to labour trafficking.



The investigation also sought to chronicle labour concerns within China’s factories, where large amounts of the world’s seafood gets processed, including catch coming from European and U.S. ships and waters.

Over the past decade, China has overseen a crackdown on Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities in Xinjiang, a province in the far west of the country, setting up mass detention centers and forcing detainees to work in cotton plantations, tomato farms, and polysilicate mines.

More recently, in an effort to disrupt Uyghur communities and find cheap labour for major industries, China has transferred Uyghurs to work in industries across the country.

The U.S. government has described the country’s actions as a form of genocide. Until now, however, one industry has escaped notice: seafood. As part of its labour transfer program, the Chinese government has been forcibly relocating thousands of Uyghur workers and sending them to plants on the other side of the country in Shandong province, a major seafood processing hub along the eastern coast.

That Shandong is more than two thousand miles away from Xinjiang may have helped it evade scrutiny.

But as it turns out, we found that state-sponsored forced labour from Xinjiang is used extensively in the country’s seafood factories that supply hundreds of restaurants, grocers and food service companies in the U.S., Europe and elsewhere.

This type of investigative journalism tends to have more impact if you can demonstrate the tie between crimes and consumers. As a result, our aim was to connect the supply-chain dots from the abuses at sea or in the Chinese factories to the global brands, buyers and sellers of this seafood.

In June 2023, a woman named Silvina González was walking along a beach in Maldonado, Uruguay, picking up trash, when she found a small plastic bottle holding a napkin with black writing in Mandarin. It started with the abbreviation SOS.

She quickly sent a photo of the message to her brother-in-law, who spoke Mandarin and sent back a translation: “Hello, I am a crew member of the ship Lu Qing Yuan Yu 765, and I was locked up by the company. When you see this paper, please help me call the police! Help-help.”

Sixteen months before the message in a bottle washed up on Maldonado’s shores, my team and I were in the South Atlantic chasing down ships from the Lu Qing Yuan Yu fleet. One of them was the ship named in the message.

This story was produced by The Outlaw Ocean Project, a nonprofit journalism organization in Washington, D.C. Reporting and writing was contributed by Ian Urbina, Daniel Murphy, Joe Galvin, Maya Martin, Susan Ryan, Austin Brush and Jake Conle

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