



US Senator from Louisiana Bill Cassidy is using the new reports on forced labor in India to push for more import regulations. Photo: Office of Bill Cassidy

## US lawmakers demand action on reports of abuses in India's shrimp sector

Lawmakers pounce on the latest NGO investigations and press reports alleging human rights violations in the sector.

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By [John Fiorillo](#) and [Drew Cherry](#)

US lawmakers are calling for action in response to a series of investigative reports this week detailing allegations of widespread human rights abuses and other irregularities in India's shrimp supply chain.

Separate reports from the *Associated Press* news agency and the nonprofit Corporate Accountability Lab (CAL) exposed human rights abuses and unsafe working conditions in India, which is the largest supplier of shrimp to the US market.

An investigation by The Outlaw Ocean Project, which recently [uncovered forced labor](#) at Chinese seafood processing operations, carried claims by US whistleblower Joshua Farinella that his former employer in India, Choice Canning, had knowingly sent shipments of shrimp tainted with antibiotics to its customers, including retailers Walmart and Aldi.

In addition, managers at the group told Farinella that shrimp labeled as certified to the Global Seafood Alliance's (GSA) Best Aquaculture Practices (BAP) standard was not, in fact, from BAP-certified farms, The Outlaw Ocean Project reported.

Choice Canning is a subsidiary of the family-owned Choice Group, a diversified business conglomerate headquartered in the southern Indian city of Kochi. It has branches in several major trading centers in South India, as well as the United States, Canada, South Korea and Japan.

With a trading division in the United States, Choice USA, it is a major supplier of farmed shrimp to key retailers and foodservice companies operating in the US market.

Choice Canning denied the allegations published in The Outlaw Ocean Project's report. In an email to IntraFish, a company spokesperson wrote: "The allegations that have been brought against our company are false and without merit."

Thomas Jose, director at Choice Canning, told **IntraFish** by telephone that the allegations were untrue and said the company was the subject of a "witch hunt" by a "disgruntled ex-employee".

The company's lawyers have addressed all claims in the report and submitted documentation to The Outlaw Ocean Project denying the allegations.

In total, India shipped 296,000 metric tons of shrimp worth more than \$2.3 billion (€2.1 billion) into the United States last year.

### Lawmakers pounce

In a letter dated March 18 and obtained by **IntraFish**, the US House of Representatives' Committee on Natural Resources contacted the whistleblower to request documentation related to his former employer's operations in India.

The committee told Farinella in the letter that the evidence he supplied to The Ocean Outlaw Project suggested that Choice Canning potentially violated US laws and policies related to the use of antibiotics in food and the importation of product made using forced labor, as well as fraudulent reporting through the US Seafood Import Monitoring Program (SIMP).

The committee also called into question Choice Canning's adherence to rules governing the use of the BAP eco-label.

It requested that Farinella deliver documentation supporting his allegations by April 2.

Earlier this month, officials at the US State Department, the US Department of Labor and the US Customs and Border Protection received letters from The Signals Network, a non-profit group that supports whistleblowers, on behalf of Farinella. That letter called for the agencies to investigate potential violations of federal laws.

Among the group's allegations in its letter is that Choice Canning's products made their way into military bases across at least 24 states via the Defense Commissary Agency, which procures food for branches of the US Armed Forces.

On Wednesday, US Senator Bill Cassidy, a Republican from Louisiana, used the release of The Outlaw Ocean Project report to question the safety of imported shrimp and defend the US domestic wild shrimp industry.

"Today's report outlining the abuses at Choice Canning Company's shrimp processing factory in India makes clear why Indian shrimp does not belong on the shelf alongside Louisiana shrimp," said Cassidy.

#### CHOICE CANNING'S FULL STATEMENT IN RESPONSE TO THE OCEAN OUTLOOK PROJECT INVESTIGATION

*The allegations that have been brought against our company are false and without merit.*

*For 67 years, Choice Canning Company Inc. has proudly served our customers by exporting quality seafood products from India. During our history we have maintained a spotless record with regulators and continue to exceed industry standards to ensure our products meet all certifications. Throughout our history we have dedicated significant resources to developing and adhering to comprehensive auditing processes and protocols as well as employee welfare programs. We are one of the few shrimp processors globally to receive an "A" in the BSCI social audit following a complete on-site inspection of our facilities.*

*Since our founding in 1953 in a small fishing village in Southern India, we have continuously sought to grow, develop and support the communities where we operate in the United States and India. For example, in 1991, the Choice Foundation opened a school admitting 80 students and employing seven female teachers. Since then, the three Choice Schools in Kerala State have positively impacted the lives of thousands through quality education and provided livelihoods to hundreds of female teachers. The Choice Schools have been recognized as the seventh best in India. Additionally, in 2022, the Choice Foundation launched the "Choice Women Empowerment Program" which has aimed at improving the quality of life for women in Andhra Pradesh State through professional growth opportunities.*

Source: Choice Canning

He urged the US Trade Representative "to act to ensure American consumers are not put in harm's way."

Last year, Cassidy introduced two bills to address what he called "India's dumping of cheap shrimp and produce into US markets." Additionally, he successfully pushed the International Trade Commission last year to retain anti-dumping orders for frozen warmwater shrimp from India, China, Thailand and Vietnam. (Copyright)

[Trade](#) [Farmed shrimp](#) [Choice Canning](#) [India](#) [Outlaw Ocean Project](#) [Ian Urbina](#)