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Outlaw Ocean whistleblower Josh Farinella: "I want to see a change" "If you do any kind of research or even a simple Google search on signs of forced labor, what I was

seeing checked every box." **Cliff White published in Supply & Trade**

Josh Farinella | Photo courtesy of Outlaw Ocean Project osh Farinella is a former general manager at Kerala, India-based shrimp processor and exporter Choice Canning. He was recently featured by the Outlaw Ocean Project as the source of allegations of labor abuse at Choice Canning's Amalapuram facility. Farinella recently filed formal whistleblower complaints with the U.S. Food and Drug Administration and several

they had this shiny new facility in Andhra Pradesh with state-of-the-art everything that's essentially going to revolutionize shrimp production overseas. I was definitely interested and had a couple of meetings with the owner. We got the salary all worked out and the

employment contract signed.

other federal agencies.

SeafoodSource: Moving to India is a pretty big deal. What made you want to take that leap? Farinella: The opportunity and the salary that was offered to me was essentially lifechanging. It allowed my wife to not have to work anymore and gave us a pretty firm timeline of five years there until essentially retirement or semi-retirement somewhere with

Farinella: I initially started with Choice Canning when they opened up their production

Lund's Fisheries in in New Jersey in 2020. Then, in 2023, Choice recruited me back saying

facility in Pittston, Pennsylvania, in 2015, and I spent several years with them. I moved on to

SeafoodSource: How did you end up working at Choice Canning?

I sent a message out to the owner, saying, "Hey, what do we do with this?" You fully expect them to say, "Get rid of it, destroy it, and send it back." You don't expect them to say, "Ship it to the U.S."

Farinella: So, I guess what happened is my eyes were opened to what the actual

operations and conditions were. Once I got over there, it turned into something else very

quickly. It started with antibiotic-positive shrimp being received at the factory. Then, when

SeafoodSource: How did you find out the shrimp coming into the facility was antibiotic-

Farinella: The raw material was tested when it arrived at an on-site laboratory that does

rapid-result tests. If it tests positive there, it goes out to an external accredited laboratory

for confirmation testing. This specific product had already tested positive on the internal

Once the confirmation came back and I sent that message out asking what they wanted

and external laboratories, and in that time, it had already been packed for a customer.

SeafoodSource: Besides antibiotics, it sounds like you began to have some concerns

Farinella: There was a text message I received in the middle of the night – it might have

been like 2:30 in the morning – from one of the production managers who was on-site,

saying, "Hey, we've got an employee, a migrant worker, trying to run through the water-

me to do with it, the response was the same: "We give it to the customer."

about labor conditions at the factory as well?

about a month-and-a-half delay from when I arrived to when this new facility was going to

be up and running. But as of two weeks ago, that facility still had another three or four

months to go before it was going to be ready for inaugural trials. I got over there in

October 2023, and I got back [to Pennsylvania] on 16 February.

positive?

were?

north of Andhra Pradesh.

the minimum wage."

to survive on?

your eye?

be here for a short amount of time."

living arrangements like for the workers?

SeafoodSource: What happened between October and February?

treatment portion of the facility to climb over a wall and get out because security won't allow her to leave. Her contractor wants her to pay money to be able to leave." That's what initially set off some alarm bells and raised some red flags for me. **SeafoodSource:** How did that specific situation get resolved? Farinella: I was told it was just a misunderstanding, and then when you look into things further down the road, you realized maybe it wasn't a misunderstanding, like the

sequences of misunderstandings lead to a pattern where you later found out these

off. Some of them hadn't been able to go home in two-plus years.

employees are not free to leave whenever they want. They work year-round with no days

SeafoodSource: Did you learn more about who the workers in the Amalapuram factory

Farinella: Most of them were migrant laborers from the Orissa area, which is a little bit

SeafoodSource: What was the work environment like at the factory, and what were the

Farinella: So, to be clear, this was at the Amalapuram factory, not the new facility that was

under construction. There's also a factory in Cochin, and several other facilities they're

Farinella: The pay rates varied, but I know they weren't getting even the state-required minimum wage. There was a point where I was trying to renegotiate the workers' wages with their contractors. I knew they were making INR 350 (USD 4.20, EUR 3.87) per day, and I proposed an increase to INR 400 (USD 4.81, EUR 4.42).

Shortly after that, one of Choice's HR people said, "Hey, if you're going to increase their

I wasn't entirely sure how to take that to the owner, JT [Jose Thomas], because I figured

his son, who was also one of the owners, and the son relayed the message to his father,

he's going to be really upset that his people aren't getting paid minimum wage. We called

who sent an email saying, "I can't believe this is happening. Choice always pays what we're

supposed to pay." Right after that, there was another email from the VP of HR with the legal

team in copy, saying, "Sir, we're paying everybody exactly as you told us to pay them. You

said we didn't have to pay the minimum wage until we move because we're only going to

SeafoodSource: What is the wage of an average Indian worker? Is minimum wage enough

wages, you have to increase it to at least INR 450 [USD 5.41, EUR 4.97] a day so that it meets

SeafoodSource: Do you know how much the workers were getting paid?

Farinella: The way things were explained to me before I went over there is that most of the workers are just working to put food on the table – that the things like rent and mortgage aren't really a thing there because they're all living in the same houses that their parents and grandparents lived in, so they don't really have any bills. I don't know how true that is or isn't, but that's how it was explained to me.

In my own experience, produce and rice are pretty inexpensive. But I don't know, maybe

it's just from my standard of living that USD 5.00 (EUR 4.60) a day is a bit of a stretch. From

what I understand, they all had to pay fees to the labor contractors who recruited them as

an exchange with one of the migrant workers who hadn't been home in two years, is that

well. I never saw any of these employment contracts myself ... but what I do know through

checked every box. **SeafoodSource:** How sure are you that these workers were being kept involuntarily at the facility? **Farinella:** I had conversations with HR and with the employee welfare team where they said, "No, they can't go anywhere. They rely on a gate-pass system, where security and their employment contractors have to approve them leaving this facility." That came with a timeline to come back by a certain time. There is an 8-foot wall that surrounds the entire compound, and at one point, part of that wall had a hole in it. Workers were using that

hole to leave so they could bypass the gate-pass system and the security. They had to

hurry up and patch that hole so that they were able to get their movements under control.

product that comes out of these peeling sheds – and we're talking 20,000 pounds per day just out of those sheds that comes over here – is produced in conditions that are far less than sanitary. **SeafoodSource:** Does Choice exclusively contract with independent farms, or does it run any of its own farms?

Farinella: It's all contracted third parties farming the shrimp. Choice doesn't own any

SeafoodSource: Did you get to know anything about the relationship Choice had with its

Farinella: Well, it was kind of an odd situation because for the books, as far as audits and

what the rest of the world gets to see, they show that shrimp was only purchased from

BAP-certified farms. When I had discussions with the upper QA management, they said,

"No, that's actually a lie; Choice doesn't purchase from BAP farms – all product is purchased

from local unregistered farms." This conversation came about when I asked about all of the

antibiotic-positive shrimp that was coming in because if we're purchasing from BAP farms,

SeafoodSource: Did your relationship with Choice's upper management change as you

Farinella: Once things went from being explained as a one-off or misunderstanding to a

time or another who said, "Hey, mistakes are okay, but repeat mistakes are a problem."

SeafoodSource: When did you decide to leave the company, and how did you inform

Farinella: I found myself really questioning things in December. Being that far from home

safety concern, but I decided that I was going to tender my resignation from the airport on

my way back to the [United] States. I sent an email to ownership saying, "Hey, I'm going to

use two weeks of my PTO time, and once that's up effective 1 March, I'll be resigning my

Farinella: The only text I got from anybody was from one of the owners, who said, "Hey,

did not return that call, and Choice hasn't contacted me since. I do know that they have

Farinella: We're going back 10-plus years in the past, where I had a lot of issues. I got in

trouble on several occasions, and it was all related to writing bad checks, essentially. That's

we're sorry to see you go, but we need to ensure a smooth transition. Give me a call back." I

responded to [the Outlaw Ocean report]. Most of that response, I guess there's no point in

in that area of the world, I don't know, maybe it was paranoia, maybe it was a legitimate

very clear pattern, that's where things changed. I think we've all had a boss at one point in

none of that should exist. Yet, here it was on a regular basis.

management of your decision?

SeafoodSource: What was their reaction?

hiding it, is centered around my background.

Joshua Farinella" doesn't fit Choice's narrative.

change.

steps?

SeafoodSource: Are you willing to talk about that at all?

position."

began to ask more questions about the things you were observing?

Farinella: Well, antibiotic-positive products are banned by the FDA for a reason. All of the

concerns? Farinella: [I did this] because change needs to happen, both in consumers knowing that their product is safe and that all of these workers, no matter where they are, should be treated with that same amount of respect regardless of where they're from or what they're

doing. So, I'm doing this because I want to see a change or at least the beginnings of a

SeafoodSource: Where are you now? What's your situation now? What are your next

Farinella: I'm job-hunting, basically, even though I know it's highly likely that once this

I've kind of accepted that, but I guess I can live with that. I can transition to other food

Farinella: It's a close-knit industry; everybody knows everybody. Time will tell. I mean,

there are so many companies that process overseas, so why is it really necessary to take a

down to how much any company really wants to show that they're doing the right thing.

chance on me, who just came back from overseas and all of this happened? It really comes

SeafoodSource: Do you really think that the seafood industry will blackball you?

sectors, but I'm not entirely sure what my future holds.

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comes out, there is a chance that I'll be completely blackballed from the seafood industry.

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warm weather and beaches in the South Carolina area. **SeafoodSource:** What did you know about the company before you signed the contract? What was their reputation, and what were you expecting out of working there? Farinella: Like I said, I worked with them for five years in their Pennsylvania facility, so I already knew the products and the ownership. I knew the company had a great reputation and about all of the good PR they were receiving regularly. I had all of that to base my decision on. **SeafoodSource:** Were there any other executives without connections to India in the company, or were you the only one? Farinella: I was the only one. I was told by the owner that this was the first time in the Indian shrimp industry where an American had been brought in to run it. **SeafoodSource:** Did they tell you why they chose you? Farinella: I didn't ask why they chose me. Again, I knew the company, I had a good relationship with the company, and the opportunity was life-changing for me going down the road. **SeafoodSource:** How long was the contract, and what was your job description? Farinella: The agreement I had with the owner is that it would be five years, but it was a one-year renewing contract because I had to come back and renew my visa every year. I was hired to be the general manager of Unit 4, which was the new facility that was being built [in Bapatla]. There were going to be some new pieces of equipment that had never been used in shrimp production before; like for grading the shrimp, the accuracy would be increased, and the output would be higher. The technology involved would have made it so much more efficient and accurate. When I got there in October, I knew there was going to be

producing out of. At the facility I was working at, there were over 650 workers living on-site, but only enough beds for 500 workers and enough toilet and shower facilities for about 250 workers; some of the showers didn't even work sometimes. Some workers had been sleeping on mattresses on the floors, and some of them had to share a bed with somebody else. While one person worked, the other would be able to use the bed to sleep, and they would rotate off and on like that.

she said she didn't have the money to go home, and the cost of a train ticket for her to go home was INR 450. It's me speculating, but it's tough to find a scenario, when your living expenses and food are already taken care of, you don't have 450 rupees to go see your family.

SeafoodSource: Were the workers misled in terms of how much they were going to be

Farinella: Again, that's not something I know for sure one way or the other. When I

questioned one of the employee welfare executives about some of the conditions on-site,

it was explained that these conditions were still way better than where they came from.

SeafoodSource: Were there any instances of unusual or unethical behavior that caught

Farinella: One of the men's dormitory areas, when I went on a tour of the facility, wouldn't

even be shown to me. I stumbled across it accidentally when I decided to walk up on the

roof of the ammonia compressor building. I saw the dormitory area with some bunks in it,

and they were all full; there were mattresses lined up on the floor with migrant workers

sleeping on them. I saw that they didn't get blankets, sheets, pillows, or anything that

anybody should be given if [they were] going to be living there. If you do any kind of

research or even a simple Google search on signs of forced labor, what I was seeing

paid when they took these jobs? How did they end up in this situation?

SeafoodSource: Did you get the feeling that this was standard practice in the Indian shrimp industry? Farinella: Again, this was my first experience in the Indian shrimp industry. I really didn't have a lot to gauge where their practices stood in relation to the rest of the industry over there. But, there was an instance where Choice was looking for external peeling sheds to use. I was told, "Don't worry about it; everybody does it." Industry-wise, that seemed to be a common practice, or at least it was what I was being told so that I wouldn't question it. **SeafoodSource:** What about the use of external peeling sheds was a red flag for you?

Farinella: They're completely off the books; they're unregulated. Producers have to report

Consortium], or whatever else, you have to list everywhere you produce, and Choice made

SeafoodSource: Did you get the feeling that the auditors were just kept in the dark? Or,

Farinella: So, BAP and BRC audits were both performed by the same certification body –

SGS – and the same auditor was on-site for both of those audits. On both of those audits,

the audit report states there are no outsourced processes – there's nothing done off-site.

going along to get along, I'm not sure. There's a section of the BAP audit report that states

there's no local worker used, and there were only 250 migrant workers being used. Right

after that's documented – right after the auditor takes those notes – he goes on a tour of

the facility and physically walks past 700 workers in the facility and didn't raise an eyebrow

SeafoodSource: What was your impression about the attitude of the company higher-ups

Farinella: It was clear to me through the records and the documentation that everybody

SeafoodSource: When did you decide to start collecting this documentation and for what

knew what was happening. I could see stuff I was looped into via email or WhatsApp.

Farinella: Eventually, I reached the point where I knew something had to be done to

SeafoodSource: Are you saying the food coming out of this factory was not safe for

something to hopefully drive a change in the industry.

change this situation. People shouldn't have to live like that. People shouldn't have to be

involved in any kind of conditions like that. The U.S. consumer also needs to know that the

food reaching our plates is safe. Once all of these things kind of clicked, I knew I had to do

As far as whether the auditors were kept in the dark or whether were they just kind of

all of their manufacturing facilities to the FDA to get a registration number. When you go

through your annual audits, whether it's [Best Aquaculture Practices] or [British Retail

sure that these external peeling sheds were not documented.

were they kind of willingly ignorant of this practice?

or ask a question.

purpose?

human consumption?

farms.

farmers?

toward the situation at the factory?

what it was. Choice's response has been the narrative that the criminal Joshua Farinella can't be trusted because of this. I get it; they're trying to discredit the source, but at the end of the day, the research, the data, and the documentation doesn't lie. It speaks for itself, and it speaks loudly enough that it got the attention of the U.S. House Committee on Nature Resources and the attention of U.S. senators. It was serious enough that I filed federal whistleblower complaints with the U.S. [Food and Drug Administration], the [U.S. Customs] and Border Protection, [U.S. Department of] State, and [the U.S. Department of] Labor.

Looking past my background issues, if you look at recently, it's a regular thing that I'm

invited to speak at food safety summits and conferences around the world. I was offered a

seat on the Marine Stewardship Council Stakeholder Advisory Council, and there's only 13

of those seats in the world. I was offered a spot on the academic advisory council for Seton

Hall University's Stillman School of Business, but "highly respected industry professional

SeafoodSource: Ultimately, why are you stepping forward in such a public way with your

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