

# US lawmakers seize on report of labor abuses in Indian shrimp sector

Lawmakers from both chambers of the US Congress have gone on the offensive, demanding investigations and tariffs, following Wednesday's report by the Outlaw Ocean Project

By [Dan Gibson](#) | March 22, 2024 16:29 GMT



□ The US capitol. Credit: flysnowfly / Shutterstock

The allegations raised by a former Indian shrimp factory manager against his old employers, Choice Canning Company -- a subsidiary of shrimp exporter The Choice Group -- have garnered significant attention this week in the US Congress.

The Outlaw Ocean Project (OOP), the same investigative journalism outfit that earlier stirred Capitol Hill with its investigative series spotlighting [forced labor in China](#), has US lawmakers again moving to action over an article published on Wednesday (March 20) in which it focuses instead on labor abuse and antibiotic fraud in the Indian shrimp industry.

OOP's latest article focuses on allegations made by Joshua Farinella, who was employed as general manager of Choice Canning's factory in Amalapuram, Andhra Pradesh, from October 2023 until resigning in February this year.

In response, senator Bill Cassidy, a Republican representing the state of Louisiana, has asked the president Joe Biden administration, in a short, one-page letter sent March 20 to the US Trade Representative and Customs and Border Protection, to "urgently" investigate and guarantee Farinella full whistleblower protections.

Cassidy, an advocate for the US domestic wild-caught shrimp industry in his home state, also has renewed calls for the passage of the India Shrimp Tariff Act, S. 2979. The bill, introduced in September 2023, calls for tariffs on Indian shrimp.

The legislation would introduce a rate of duty on imports of Indian shrimp that would escalate over time until it matched the basic tariff duty of 30% that India observes on its own shrimp imports from the US.

Currently, the US does not impose regular tariffs on shrimp imports, while the US Food and Drug Administration samples and tests less than 0.1% of seafood shipments for unsafe drug residues annually.



□ The Choice Canning Shrimp processing plant in Amalapuram, India, is at the heart of the latest investigative campaign from the Outlaw Ocean Project. Credit: Ben Blankenship/The Outlaw Ocean Project

"Through subsidies, sanitary cheating and dumping, Indian shrimpers are trying to drive Louisiana shrimp out of business," Cassidy said in his letter. "Specifically, the Outlaw Ocean Project's investigation, published earlier today, raises worrying concerns about the safety of shrimp imported from India into the US."

Farinella's allegations make "clear why Indian shrimp does not belong on the shelf alongside Louisiana shrimp... Indian shrimp relies on forced labor and is pumped full of antibiotics," he said in a statement accompanying his letter.

[In its original response to OOP](#), The Choice Group described Farinella's allegations as "plainly false." It denied falsifying any documents, knowingly shipping shrimp to the US that had tested positive for antibiotics, underpaying its staff, or keeping migrant workers trapped on site against their will.

"It appears that Joshua Farinella has had a key role to bring false issues to you and to mislead you to believe Choice has engaged in conduct amounting to violations of law, regulation, or otherwise," the company's statement to OOP reads.

Meanwhile, the broader Indian export sector is already on edge regarding [the impending announcement of new anti-dumping and countervailing duties on shrimp products destined for the US](#).

## Trio of representatives ask whistleblower for evidence

Not to be outdone by Cassidy, three prominent Democrats in the US House of Representatives -- Jared Huffman, Raul Grijalva and Melanie Stansbury -- have written to Farinella, requesting he present more evidence to back up his allegations by April 2, 2024.

Grijalva, from Arizona, is the ranking member on the House Natural Resources Committee, while Huffman, from California, is the ranking member on the committee's oceans panel and Stansbury, from New Mexico, is the ranking member on the committee's oversight and investigations panel.

In a letter sent March 18 to Farinella, the three lawmakers ask for a spreadsheet of worker headcounts and wages; text and WhatsApp messages; emails; and documents or recorded phone conversations, including those with The Choice Group's CEO and senior management in the US state of New Jersey.

They say in their letter that Choice Canning potentially violated five laws and policies, including:

- Sect. 307 of the Tariff Act of 1930, which prohibits imports to the US of any good derived from forced labor;
- The Lacey Act, which prohibits the import and sale of illegally obtained fish products;
- The Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act, which prohibits fraudulent reporting under the Seafood Import Monitoring program.
- The Federal Food, Drug and Cosmetic Act, which prohibits the illegal use of antibiotics; and
- Best Aquaculture Practices certification, which attempts to ensure that producers are following best practices to deliver farmed seafood safely and responsibly.

"We are disturbed by the widespread presence of forced labor and human rights violations in the seafood supply chain," the trio wrote. "As the single largest importer of seafood in the world, the US holds tremendous market influence over the operations of global fisheries."

They continued: "The actions of US-based importers and seafood companies disproportionately affect the health and safety of all seafood products and the likelihood that seafood is not produced with forced labor or through illegal, unregulated or unreported fishing practices."

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