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Walmart, Aldi linked to contaminated shrimp from India

NBC News report says Choice Canning engaged in antibiotic tainting and unsanitary working conditions

Bill Wilson | Apr 04, 2024

NBC News, in partnership with The Outlaw Ocean Project, has released a knee-buckling report on a shrimp factory in southern India that distributes products to stores like Walmart and Aldi here in the U.S.

At the center of the story is the former manager of Choice Canning Joshua Farinella, who worked at the factory for four months and left after discovering the company had allegedly engaged in several abhorrent practices, including the use of “peeling sheds” that were offsite and unsanitary, using antibiotics with shrimp in violation of U.S. food safety law, and mistreating workers.

The revelation from Farinella has the attention of Congress. In mid-March ranking Democrats in the House Committee on Natural Resources wrote a letter calling for documents related to Farinella’s claims.

“We are disturbed by the widespread presence of forced labor and human rights violations in the seafood supply chain,” the letter read. “As the single largest importer of seafood in the world, the U.S. holds tremendous market influence over the operations of global fisheries. The actions of U.S.-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.”

Rep. Mary Peltola (D-Alaska) and Rep. Garret Graves (R-La.) followed by writing a letter to President Joe Biden.

“These foreign producers are deliberately using government subsidies and shortcuts — like packing the supply with banned antibiotics or using feed caught through illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing practices — to undercut domestic shrimp suppliers and flood the American market with cheap and unsafe shrimp,” the letter stated.

Peltola and Graves said Congress is considering legislative proposals like H.R. 4547, the Laws Ensuring Safe Shrimp (LESS) Act, which provides additional resources to the FDA to ensure that imported shrimp are safe for human consumption and not supplied using illegal fishing practices.

“Walmart prohibits unsafe working conditions or forced labor of any form, and as outlined by our Antibiotics in Farm Animals Position, we limit our supplier’s use of antibiotics in the food we source, including fresh and frozen seafood,” Walmart said in an emailed statement to *Supermarket News*. “We expect suppliers to operate safe workplaces, take responsibility for the well-being of their workers, adhere to our forced labor prevention principles and to protect the integrity of the food we sell by complying with all FDA regulatory requirements and Walmart food safety standards.”

NBC News also referenced a report recently released by the Corporate Accountability Lab, a Chicago-based advocacy group, based on interviews with more than 150 workers and others in India’s shrimping sector.

The report confirmed Farinella’s allegation that workers were being mistreated and noted that shrimp production in India was causing severe environmental damage.

Regarding worker treatment, the Corporate Accountability Lab said shrimp operations in India engage in forced labor and abusive working conditions.

The CAL report also made reference to the practice of debt bondage, which forces workers to stay until a loan is paid off.

“The Aldi South Group prioritizes and values human and environmental rights throughout all of our operations. We take all supplier activities seriously and will devote all relevant time and resources to inspect this topic in accordance with our compliance process,” and Aldi spokesperson said in an emailed statement to *SN*.

According to *NBC News*, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration inspected just over 1% of shrimp imports for antibiotic traces in 2023 and refused 51 shipments of shrimp because of antibiotics. It’s a far cry from what’s going on with the European Union, which samples 50% of shrimp from India for antibiotics.

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