

US wild-catch sector pushes to add Indian shrimp to child, forced labor product lists

'It is well past time for the federal government to recognize what is obvious to everyone that looks – the 'Product of India' label on bags of shrimp in your local grocery store is a mark of unimaginable human suffering' -- John Williams, Southern Shrimp Alliance

By [Jason Huffman](#) | March 26, 2024 14:54 GMT



□ Vannamei from India. Credit: Archer Dec24/Shutterstock

The Southern Shrimp Alliance (SSA), a trade association that represents harvesters and processors of domestic wild-caught shrimp in the Southeast US, has asked the US Department of Labor (DOL) to add Indian shrimp to two lists that identify products produced with the use of child or forced labor.

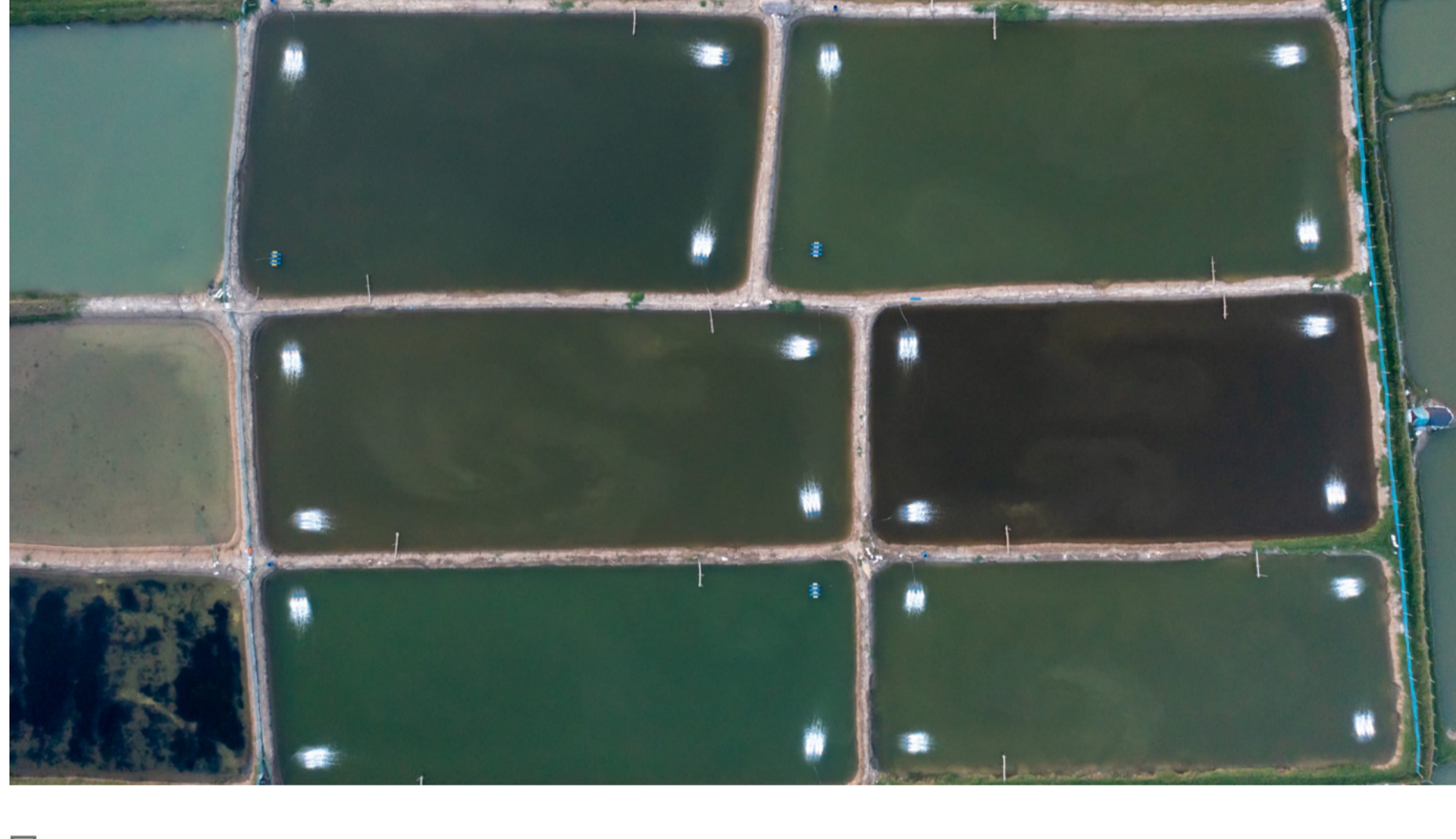
SSA said in a statement that its [15-page petition](#), sent Monday (March 25) to DOL's Office of Child Labor, Forced Labor and Human Trafficking (OCFT), was in response to separate investigative reports published last week by the [Corporate Accountability Lab \(CAL\)](#), the Outlaw Oceans Project (OOP) and *Associated Press* (AP).

OOP -- the same investigative journalism outfit behind earlier findings of forced labor in China -- published a new report on March 20 in which it shared evidence it said was provided by Joshua Farinella, a former general manager at Choice Canning's Amalapuram factory in Andhra Pradesh.

Farinella, who joined Choice in October 2023, alleged that the company was knowingly mistreating workers and shipping antibiotic-positive shrimp to the US, as reported by [Undercurrent News](#). The Choice Group has denied the claims.

SSA said the various reports confirm the earlier findings of ELEVATE (a Lloyd's Register Quality Assurance company) after investigating the Indian shrimp industry based on site visits conducted in November and December 2022. The report published by ELEVATE in May 2023, ["Human Rights Impact Assessment: Farmed Shrimp in India,"](#) said it had evidence of workers in the Indian shrimp industry being held against their will, forced to work overtime and excessive hours without pay, and subject to debt bondage.

"That call to action was unheeded," SSA said.



□ Indian shrimp culture ponds, seen from above. Credit: Aquaconnect

This is the fourth time SSA has asked DOL's Bureau of International Labor Affairs (ILAB) to add Indian shrimp to its "List of Goods Produced by Child Labor or Forced Labor." The list, last updated in September 2022 and comprising 159 items from 78 countries and areas, is a deterrent to prospective buyers of goods, suggesting they seek remedial action, a source explained to *Undercurrent*.

However, this is the first time the SSA has asked ILAB to add Indian shrimp to its "List of Products Produced by Forced or Indentured Child Labor," which requires federal agencies to obtain certification from their suppliers that goods they purchase have not been manufactured with the use of forced or child labor, the source explained.

"That request is based on the discovery that Indian shrimp is being shipped to the United States under the 'Freedom's Choice' label, a brand sold in Defense Commissaries at US military bases around the world," SSA said.

"Enough is enough," said SSA executive director John Williams. "ILAB's reports already recognize that no country in the world presents a greater risk of child and forced labor than India. It is well past time for the federal government to recognize what is obvious to everyone that looks – the 'Product of India' label on bags of shrimp in your local grocery store is a mark of unimaginable human suffering."

Congress already in action

Several US lawmakers have already been moved to action based on the latest reports.

Senator Bill Cassidy, a Republican representing the state of Louisiana, has asked the administration of president Joe Biden, 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, as reported by [Undercurrent](#).

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.

Not to be outdone, 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. They have asked 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 said in their letter that Choice Canning potentially violated five laws and policies.

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