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REPRESENTATIVE CHRISTOPHER H. SMITH, CHAIR
SENATOR JEFF MERKLEY, COCHAIR

Hearing: How Forced Labor in China Taints America's Seafood Supply Chain

Cochair Merkley Opening Statement

- Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for convening this hearing, which builds on several hearings that this Commission has held on topics such as the implementation of the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act, the plight of North Korean refugees in China, the aggressive long-arm of the Chinese government, and the importance of holding American corporations to account when they are accomplices in human rights abuses.
- Today we will hear about fresh investigative reporting from The Outlaw Ocean Project that gives us even more information about the prevalence of forced labor in China.
- This time we are examining the seafood supply chain, including its vulnerability to forced labor both on land and at sea.
- At least ten major seafood companies in China were found to have received more than a thousand Uyghurs and other predominantly Muslim ethnic minorities from the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.
- These individuals were forcibly transferred to work in seafood processing factories in Shandong province, thousands of miles away from Xinjiang.
- My colleagues at the Commission and I are horrified to learn that this seafood processed by Uyghur forced laborers is reportedly entering the United States— something we worked hard to stop with the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act.
- We will continue working with our friends at the Department of Homeland Security and Customs and Border Protection to fully enforce this legislation.
- The investigations also revealed evidence of thousands of North Korean laborers working in seafood processing centers in China along the border of North Korea.

- The Outlaw Ocean Project found that over one thousand tons of seafood have been exported to American importers by Chinese seafood-processing companies linked to North Korean labor.
- Pursuant to the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act, we must swiftly stop these imports.
- China's seafood industry is not only responsible for human trafficking, bad labor practices, and egregious human rights abuses, but it is also tied to China's illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing, which has global repercussions for the environment, for food security, and for our national security.
- The PRC's maritime aggression is alarming, as their fishing fleets have been found to overfish, target protected species, and encroach on waters of other countries, violating international law.
- American businesses need to pay attention to this behavior and recognize that it impacts them, too.
- As we'll hear today, seafood processed in the PRC by Uyghur and North Korean forced laborers enter the United States illegally — including through U.S. federal procurements, impacting hundreds of American military bases and public school cafeterias.
- Major American grocery store chains, restaurants, and food-service companies are also implicated, unwittingly exposing thousands of American consumers to seafood linked to forced labor and egregious human rights abuses.
- For the United States to be able to protect American consumers from exposure to products tainted by forced labor and to best defend persecuted groups abroad, we need to better understand the nature and scale of this challenge.
- I look forward to learning from our witnesses on how we can use existing tools and legislation to address this challenge and what more we can do.
- Thank you, Mr. Chairman.