

Testimony of Ian Urbina before the Congressional-Executive Commission on China “The Outlaw Ocean Project Investigation: China’s Forced Labor in Aquaculture Industry”

Thank you Chair Sullivan and Co-Chair Smith, and the rest of the Commission, for inviting me to speak. It’s an honor to be back before you.

The last time I was here was in 2023, when the Commission asked me to testify about an investigation by my news team, The Outlaw Ocean Project, into China’s role in global seafood. That reporting focused on China’s more than 6,500 industrial fishing vessels and its hundreds of processing plants. It documented debt bondage, passport confiscation, avoidable deaths, fatal beatings, trafficked workers, illegal fishing, and a state-coordinated program forcing thousands of workers from Xinjiang and North Korea into seafood processing factories. Much of the product from those factories was bound for the United States, including American military bases and congressional cafeterias, in violation of the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act and the Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act. In the wake of that reporting, Congress, the executive branch, and a small handful of seafood companies took action.

I’m here today to discuss our current investigation, which will be published in the coming weeks and examines the global aquaculture industry, including China’s role in it.

By way of context: seafood is the world’s most heavily traded food commodity by value, and aquaculture, or fish farming, is the industry’s fastest-growing sector. As of 2022, more than half of all seafood worldwide was farmed rather than caught at sea.

This growth has been driven in part by a marketing claim: that fish farming is sustainable because it reduces pressure on wild fisheries. The problem is that for much of the industry, that claim is false. Roughly two-thirds of global aquaculture depends on feed made from wild-caught fish, in the form of fishmeal and fish oil. Think of the seafood people eat most: salmon, shrimp, tilapia, and sea bream. In other words, many farmed fish are fed the very wild fish the industry claims it is helping to spare.

Not all aquaculture works this way. Roughly a third of global fish farming focuses on non-fed species such as clams, oysters, and mussels. That form of aquaculture can indeed be sustainable.

But most fish farming depends on feed fish. And our investigation found that this segment of the industry prefers to begin the story of sustainability and ethical sourcing at the farm. If you start the story earlier, with the feed, a very different picture emerges.

Our recent investigation, called “Food for Feed,” did just that. Over the past two years, we mapped and reported on roughly 1,400 fishmeal plants worldwide, boarded and inspected ships supplying them, traced the farms to which the feed goes, and tracked the resulting seafood to document the hidden costs.

In Russia’s Far East, we documented forced labor on ships, farms, and in factories. In Western Sahara, we found the industry helping prop up Morocco’s military occupation. In Gambia and Mauritania, we found fish that once fed local communities increasingly diverted into fishmeal factories for export, worsening food insecurity. In countries including India and Peru, the

industry was tied to at least 80 incidents of civil unrest, some violent, often labor strikes and community protests over polluted water or the stench from factories cooking thousands of tons of decomposing fish. In Senegal, fishmeal has pushed local fishers out of work, so that many are selling or repurposing their boats to flee to Europe, usually by making the roughly 930-mile journey to Spain's Canary Islands, a route that claimed more than 3,000 lives in 2025.

These are what economists call externalities: costs pushed onto distant countries and communities, while wealthier consumers enjoy the luxury seafood produced as a result.

So what does this have to do with China? China is the largest producer, exporter, and consumer of seafood in the world. It is also the single biggest exporter of seafood to the United States. And it is rapidly expanding fish farming so it does not have to send as many vessels onto the high seas or into foreign waters. China now grows about four times as much fish as it catches, and huge quantities of that farmed seafood are exported, including to the United States.

What is striking is where much of this expansion is happening: Xinjiang and Tibet. Fish farming typically takes place along coasts, in near-shore cages or pens. But China is expanding it in mountainous and desert regions that are among the most landlocked places on earth.

Our investigation mapped the supply chains of more than 1,200 fish farms in Xinjiang and Tibet. We found seafood from these farms going to a dozen countries, including the United States, and to companies supplying public institutions such as military bases, public schools, and congressional cafeterias. Not only is that a violation of the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act, but some of these farms in Xinjiang are certified as sustainable by U.S.-based programs such as Best Aquaculture Practices, which seems mystifying in light of U.S. law.

I do not need to remind this Commission that Tibet and Xinjiang are among the most repressive regions in China. In Tibet, the government has relocated roughly half a million people, leveling villages and monasteries for projects including hydroelectric dams and fish farms. According to a 2024 Human Rights Watch report, this effort has relied on coercive tactics including repeated home visits, threats of prosecution, and warnings that utilities could be cut off for those who refused to move. In response to such policies, at least 169 Tibetans have set themselves on fire, often on camera, outside police stations, monasteries, or public squares. In Xinjiang, more than a million people have been held in detention camps, while the government has carried out large-scale land seizures, forced sterilizations, and criminal penalties for speaking native languages or practicing religious and cultural traditions.

That seafood from these regions is still reaching the United States shows how much work remains. American seafood producers, grocers, and food-service companies such as Sysco continue to rely on certification schemes that claim to police sustainability and forced labor in places like China, where spot checks at factories, ships, or farms are effectively impossible. China is also a place where asking tough questions about Uyghurs, Tibetans, or human rights generally can get a company, civil society group, or journalist expelled. Yet the cost savings are so enticing that industry and certifiers continue to make that Faustian bargain.

Let's be clear: repression in these regions is one of China's hidden costs. It is the externality that helps produce cheap seafood. It is part of China's competitive advantage and helps explain the

trade surplus in this commodity.

The UFLPA was enacted partly to level that playing field. So were tools like the Global Magnitsky Act. Customs and Border Protection has used Withhold Release Orders to stop imports suspected of being tied to forced labor. Congress has pressed companies through letters and hearings like this one, tightened purchasing rules for federally funded institutions, and, in rare cases, forced companies to do due diligence, putting the burden on industry, rather than journalists or civil society, to prove that supply chains are free of illegal or unethical hidden costs.

Bottom line: The tools exist. The question now is whether they'll get used.

Thank you for your time today.