



CECC Hearing: Dark Nets, Illicit Labor—Confronting China’s IUU Fishing and Seafood Supply Chain

**Remarks by Cochair Chris Smith (R-NJ)
April 16, 2026**

I want to recognize my Cochair, Senator Sullivan, for his leadership on this issue and his long record of fighting to protect the American seafood industry and American fishermen. His [FISH Act](#) just passed in the Senate and I will be working with my House colleagues to get it passed in the House. His amendment in last year’s [NDAA](#) prohibited Pentagon commissaries from serving Chinese seafood to our men and women in uniform was also giant step forward. This is exactly the kind of serious leadership required to address the challenge of Chinese IUU fishing.

From the earliest days of seafaring, the oceans have been governed not only by currents and commerce, but by rules—rules that distinguish lawful navigation from piracy, fair trade from exploitation, and order from lawlessness.

Today, we are confronted with a disturbing modern version of that lawlessness: a system of dark fleets, opaque supply chains, illegal fishing, and coerced labor that threatens not only American workers, but also the human rights, the rule of law, and our national security.

Credible reporting and investigative findings have exposed deeply troubling practices within China's distant-water fishing fleet and seafood processing industry. These include widespread illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing—known as IUU fishing—as well as serious human rights abuses, including forced labor.

As our Commission heard in 2023 during the hearing I chaired *“From Bait to Plate: How Forced Labor in China Taints America’s Seafood Supply Chain,”* a significant portion of China's distant-water fleet has been linked to labor exploitation, illegal incursions into the sovereign waters of other nations, and exploitation of workers.

The abuses do not end at sea.

On land, there are grave concerns about the use of forced labor—including Uyghur and North Korean labor—in seafood processing facilities tied to global supply chains. Products processed under these conditions can make their way into international markets, including the United States, raising urgent legal, moral, and national security concerns.

We are joined again today by Mr. Ian Urbina, founder of The Outlaw Ocean Project, whose reporting has helped expose these abuses to the world. His work, and the work of others, has made one thing unmistakably clear: this is not a series of isolated incidents. It is a pattern. And it demands a response equal to its scale and seriousness.

Ian's testimony at our 2023 hearing told of North Korean laborers in Chinese seafood processing facilities whose products entered the U.S. market.

We have also recently learned that North Koreans are also being employed on Chinese flagged tuna longliners, with evidence of forced

labor that included debt bondage, physical and verbal abuse, and excessive overtime.

That is not just a labor abuse. It is a sanctions evasion issue, a human rights issue, and a national security issue.

With Senator Merkley and Senator Sullivan, I have called on the Departments of State and Homeland Security to coordinate and act swiftly to address forced labor in China's seafood industry. We raised a particularly alarming possibility: that seafood consumed in the United States could be indirectly funding North Korea's nuclear and ballistic missile programs.

Our message was simple. The United States must not allow its consumers, its taxpayers, or its government procurement systems to become unwitting participants in forced labor or sanctions evasion.

That means stronger enforcement to stop tainted seafood at the border, and it means ensuring that no federal procurement system—including military bases, school meal programs, or other government facilities—relies on products linked to forced labor.

Because let us be clear: China's illegal fishing practices and the use of forced labor in its seafood supply chain are not merely unethical—they are in clear violation of U.S. law, including the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act (which I lead with Senator Rubio and Merkley and McGovern) and the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act.

We know the administration has said that addressing IUU fishing is a priority. We know Customs and Border Protection has issued withhold release orders on Chinese vessels and barred products from at least one Chinese seafood processor.

We know CBP has the authority to act. What we need to know now is whether that authority is being used with the urgency and rigor this crisis demands.

After our 2023 hearing, Chinese seafood was added to CBP's priority enforcement list. Companies and retailers took notice—Lotte (Low-Tay) stores in South Korea and McDonalds promised to stop importing Chinese seafood.

We hope today's hearing produces that same kind of impact—but more importantly, we hope it leads to sustained action.

This hearing is about protecting American jobs and protecting national security as well. China's distant-water fishing fleet does not operate in a vacuum. These vessels often advance the Chinese Communist Party's objectives: asserting maritime claims, projecting presence in disputed waters, distorting markets, and exploiting vulnerable workers in service of larger geopolitical ambitions.

So this is about more than seafood. It is about whether the United States will tolerate a system that rewards coercion, harms American fisherman, weakens sanctions enforcement, creates food insecurity in Africa, and erodes the integrity of global commerce.

That is why we are here today. And that is why this hearing matters.