

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

June 2, 2022

President Joseph R. Biden Jr.
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Biden:

June is World Oceans Month, and as your Administration prepares for the 2022 United Nations Ocean Conference in Lisbon this June, we ask that you focus your attention on the intertwined challenges of illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing and human rights abuses in the global seafood supply chain by making a strong commitment to action. The United States should head into the U.N. Ocean Conference as a leader in combatting these issues on the international stage.

IUU fishing occurs on the high seas and in Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) across the globe and threatens marine ecosystems, fisheries health, livelihoods of honest fishers, national security, and global food security. IUU fishing activities include fishing without authorization, using prohibited fishing gear, disregarding limits on the amount of catch, fishing in protected or closed areas, catching species that do not fall under any management regime, or flouting reporting requirements. As a result, IUU fishing depletes fish stocks—essential to basic human nutrition in much of the world—and destroys marine habitats. The effects ripple throughout ocean ecosystems and coastal communities.

However, the impacts of IUU fishing extend far beyond environmental health. On the high seas, where accountability is lacking, IUU fishing is often connected with illicit activities such as human trafficking and forced labor. Lack of oversight and enforcement in the global seafood sector has fostered human rights and labor abuses at sea, where crew members remain on vessels for long periods of time, subjected to debt bondage, inhumane working conditions and are forced to endure severe abuse. Forced labor is also found in seafood processing facilities in a number of countries.

Not only is forced labor in seafood supply chains a scourge for responsible fisheries management and global human rights, it also harms honest coastal economies, consumers, and American fishers who are already facing an onslaught of challenges and are forced to compete in markets that are rife with unfair foreign trade practices. Forced and slave labor abroad amounts to a cost-cutting measure, meaning IUU fishing undercuts and disadvantages domestic fisheries. This hurts sustainable American fisheries and puts our fishermen out of work and consumers at risk of eating seafood that is mislabeled and unsafe.

Furthermore, one of the reasons we introduced legislation and supported your Administration's action to ban Russian seafood is because IUU fishing has severe national security implications. Its entanglement with transnational crime poses a threat to economic security. Followed by

Russia, China has been identified in the global [IUU Fishing Index](#) as the top offender of IUU fishing—using its fishing fleet, and onshore fishing infrastructure in other nations, to project “soft” power around the world.

In addition to combatting IUU fishing and labor abuses, we also need traceability to enforce our ban on Russian seafood imports. Without full supply chain traceability, it is impossible to trace seafood to the country of origin. More than a quarter of Russian catch is sent to China before being exported to the United States.¹ The U.S. imported \$1.2 billion worth of seafood from Russia in 2021, so being able to effectively trace Russian seafood is crucial for cracking down on President Putin’s senseless war. We examined this issue in a hearing in the Subcommittee on Water, Oceans, and Wildlife on April 7.

For all these reasons, IUU fishing is a threat that merits your attention and action. As we approach the U.N. Ocean Conference, we urge you to focus on the theme of the conference: “Scaling up ocean action based on science and innovation for the implementation of Goal 14: stocktaking, partnerships and solutions.” Sustainable Development Goal 14 is to “Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development.” Sustainable use and development means putting a stop to illegal fishing, which often adversely impacts poor countries and subsistence fishers, and using the best available technologies for monitoring and detecting nefarious actions.

Concern about illegal fishing and forced labor has gained significant momentum in Congress. In May 2021, we introduced H.R. 3075, the *Illegal Fishing and Forced Labor Prevention Act*, to combat IUU fishing and human rights abuses in the global seafood sector. This legislation would address these connected issues by increasing traceability of seafood and transparency of fishing activity at sea.

Major provisions of H.R. 3075 were included in the America COMPETES Act and the Coast Guard reauthorization, both of which passed the House earlier this year. This is a bipartisan priority to address illegal fishing and forced labor in the global seafood industry and to prevent access to U.S. markets. Combatting IUU includes expanding the Seafood Import Monitoring Program (SIMP) to all imported seafood, creating requirements for large fishing vessels to broadcast automatic identification systems (AIS) in the U.S. EEZ, and strengthening policy tools for the United States to identify nations engaged in IUU fishing and labor abuses to compel them to reduce these harmful practices. We will continue to promote this legislation in Congress, and we ask you to use existing executive branch authorities to tackle the urgent issue of IUU fishing in the meantime.

The U.N. Ocean Conference provides a unique opportunity for the United States—as a leader on ocean and human rights issues, as well as the world’s largest seafood importer—to invigorate our leadership on these critical issues and encourage other nations to take a strong stance as well. We encourage you to make a strong announcement related to IUU fishing ahead of the U.N. Ocean Conference, similar to the announcement at the first Our Ocean Conference in 2014 of the

¹ United States International Trade Commission. Seafood Obtained via Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated Fishing: U.S. Imports and Economic Impact on U.S. Commercial Fisheries. February 2021. <https://www.usitc.gov/publications/332/pub5168.pdf>

Presidential Task Force Combating IUU Fishing and Seafood Fraud. The activities of the task force resulted in significant progress, but much work remains to be done.

We greatly appreciate the collaboration on this issue that has arisen with Dr. Rick Spinrad, Under Secretary of Commerce for Oceans and Atmosphere & National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Administrator. Based on recent conversations, we are hopeful about NOAA's commitment to expanding the use of existing technologies to combat IUU fishing and forced labor to ensure that products from these practices never enter our borders. We are committed to working with your Administration to secure the necessary resources to expand the Seafood Import Monitoring Program.

It is imperative that the United States protects the quality of its seafood and human rights around the world. Addressing IUU is an important step in ensuring that, not only are our citizens eating safe and healthy food, but that their economic interests are protected. We cannot continue to allow countries such as China and Russia to undercut our honest fishers by abusing our oceans and fellow human beings. Your Administration has the opportunity to make a strong statement on IUU fishing ahead of the U.N. Ocean Conference—and we hope that you will.

We are eager to work with your Administration to combat illegal fishing and forced labor and level the playing field for American fisheries. Thank you for your continued leadership and for considering our views.

Sincerely,



Jared Huffman
Member of Congress



Garret Graves
Member of Congress