

U.S. Leaders Commit to Tackling Illegal Fishing at UN Ocean Conference

Environmental, human rights and labor groups welcome action against IUU fishing, seek strong implementation of agency commitments

Lisbon, Portugal, June 27, 2022 - At the United Nations Ocean Conference this week, the United States made a series of announcements elevating its commitment to combat illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing and associated labor abuses.

The U.S. IUU and Labor Rights Coalition, a group comprised of human rights, labor, and environmental organizations, made the following statement: “The United States government’s actions this week to more aggressively tackle the linked problems of IUU fishing and forced labor are necessary steps toward protecting the world’s ocean, food security, and the billions of people who depend on healthy fisheries. We are pleased to see that the White House has recognized through a National Security Memorandum that illegal fishing and labor abuses not only pose a major threat to national security but also exacerbate climate change, and that they have committed to bringing the full strength of U.S. government agencies to bear in tackling these problems. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s (NOAA) announcement that the definition of IUU fishing will now explicitly include fishing activities that use forced labor will strengthen U.S. enforcement and capacity building tools and could lead to dramatically improved fishing practices beyond U.S. waters.

“To truly leverage all U.S. Government resources to stop IUU fishing and human rights abuses as the National Security Memorandum aims to do, it is critical to increase global use of on-the-water transparency technology, to have specific mechanisms and timelines to ensure government agencies are working together, and that all imported seafood be fully traceable. This must include NOAA acting quickly to bring all imported seafood under the Seafood Import Monitoring Program requirements.”

Individual organizations made the following statements:

Sandy Aylesworth, Senior Ocean Advocate, Natural Resources Defense Council, said:

“The White House has demonstrated much-needed U.S. leadership in its whole-of-government commitment to combat the global scourge of illegal fishing and closely linked labor abuses. More work will be needed to shed light on these harmful practices and stop the flow of illegal seafood into the United States market. NRDC looks forward to working with the Biden Administration to redouble efforts to protect the ocean for the health and enjoyment of future generations.”

John Hocevar, Oceans Campaign Director, Greenpeace USA, said: “President Biden has taken some critical steps toward highlighting the environmental and human rights issues that plague seafood supply chains. However, eliminating forced labor and illegal fishing will require more action from governments around the world to hold fishing fleets and seafood businesses accountable. The US government must follow these commitments with tangible action, starting with supporting a strong Global Oceans Treaty in August.”

Noor Hamadeh, International Corporate Accountability Roundtable (ICAR), said:

“The announcement to include forced labor in the definition of IUU fishing is an important step toward preventing forced labor in U.S. seafood supply chains. However, implementation will need to involve the development of labor related key data indicators and the requirement for disclosure of beneficial ownership information from seafood importers. While we welcome this move by the Biden administration, we’re also waiting to see what tangible implementation looks like.”

Joan Eads, Interim Executive Director, FishWise, said:

“FishWise is grateful for President Biden’s continued commitment to tackling IUU fishing and labor abuses that harm vulnerable workers and honest companies. We are pleased to see that the President’s memo provides a clear mandate for the U.S. government to promote labor and human rights as an integral part of combating IUU fishing. As an organization that works directly with seafood supply chains on these issues we strongly urge the U.S. government to transparently report on progress, and invite opportunities for broader collaboration on the challenging work ahead.”

Beth Lowell, Vice President for the United States, Oceana, said:

“This week the United States stepped up in the fight against illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing and the associated labor abuses. The actions and commitments show that the U.S. government is making progress in the fight against IUU fishing, forced labor, and other human rights abuses, but more still needs to be done. Until the United States holds all seafood imports to the same standards as U.S.-caught fish, illegally sourced seafood will continue to be sold alongside legal catch. Oceana looks forward to working with the Biden administration and agencies to enact real change following these initial steps.”

About the Groups

The U.S. IUU and Labor Rights Coalition organizations include Greenpeace USA, International Corporate Accountability Roundtable, Earthjustice, FishWise, Natural Resources Defense Council, Oceana, and World Wildlife Fund.