

Amended IUU fishing bill approved by House committee would expand SIMP

By Steve Bittenbender

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A U.S. congressional committee has passed an amended bill that seeks to prevent more seafood produced through illegal practices from entering the country – in part by expanding the Seafood Import Monitoring Program (SIMP).

The U.S. House Natural Resources Committee on Wednesday, 13 October, voted to advance the Illegal Fishing and Forced Labor Prevention Act, legislation sponsored by U.S. Reps. Jared Huffman (D-California) and Garret Graves (R-Louisiana).

Under H.R. 3075, the government would expand SIMP to cover all seafood products entering the country, up from the 13 species the government currently checks for mislabeling or to determine if it was caught with the use of forced labor.

Huffman, who chairs the committee's Subcommittee on Water, Oceans, and Wildlife, said illegal fishing hurts U.S. fisheries and that current policies have created "gaps" that let some of those products into restaurants and grocery stores.

"It's our problem because we are the top importer of seafood in the world, and our high seas are like the wild west," he said. "The lawless nature of the open ocean really lends itself to exploitation of fishermen. No one is watching."

Graves said countries like China, Russia, Mexico, and Cambodia have condoned illegal fishing practices. In the past six years, Graves said the U.S. Coast Guard has filed nearly 250 cases against Mexican fishermen for illegal activities. It's a major problem for fishermen in Louisiana, Graves said, which ranks second to Alaska in domestic seafood production.

"We represent a huge commercial fishing industry, and our fishers can't compete if you're going to have folks out there carrying out illegal practices, if they're overfishing areas, if they're going into other countries waters," he added.

Supporters of the bill, which will now move to the full U.S. House of Representatives for a vote, said the law will help ensure all fishing businesses are playing by the same rules and prevent human rights abuses.

Southern Shrimp Alliance Executive Director John Williams said in a statement the proposed legislation puts "American fishermen first" in a bipartisan manner.

"Opportunities are rare as hens' teeth for Congress to expand the reach of the United States' high standards for human rights and marine conservation globally while at the same time protecting American workers and families forced to compete with illegal imports," he said.

Oceana Deputy Vice President for U.S. Campaigns Beth Lowell said in a statement that U.S. customers will also benefit from the legislation, as new regulations will keep buyers from being the "victim to a bait-and-switch" by ensuring all products are labeled correctly.

"By expanding import requirements and vessel transparency, requiring full-chain traceability, and giving the U.S. more tools to fight IUU fishing, the Illegal Fishing and Forced Labor Prevention Act offers a promising pathway to combat illegal fishing, which threatens the future of our oceans and those who depend on it for food and livelihoods," Lowell said.

As part of its deliberations, the committee approved an amendment that eased some of the proposed regulations it contained for U.S. fishing vessels. A requirement for boats longer than 50 feet to use automatic identification systems (AIS) for tracking purposes, was removed, though the amended bill keeps the requirement for vessels 65 feet in length and longer.

Huffman noted stakeholder feedback that led to the amendment. Last month, a group of more than 100 U.S. fishing industry stakeholders sent him and U.S. Rep. Cliff Bentz (R-Oregon) a letter noting that most American vessels use different technology and that redundant systems would increase costs. Using AIS would also open the door for competitors to learn the location of their boats.

However, while the amendment eases the requirement for smaller-vessel owners, Huffman said a subsidy program will remain in place for those fishermen to acquire what he called "crucial technology" for detecting illegal fishing practices.

"It's also very important that we hold our domestic fleet to this standard of transparency so that we can then hold foreign fleets, unscrupulous foreign operators, to account," Huffman said. "And we can only do that if we include this technology in our own domestic fleet."

The bill does faces opposition from U.S. Rep. Pete Stauber (R-Minnesota), who said he understands the need to combat human rights abuses, but said he fears that small businesses like Morey's Seafood International, a seafood retailer in his district, may get saddled with higher costs that are then passed on to consumers.

Stauber submitted a letter from the trade group National Fisheries Institute, supported by nearly 100 companies, that expressed similar concerns and asking for "a better solution" to be identified.

"It's imperative we don't punish good actors like them when trying to solve a problem," Stauber said.

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Steve Bittenbender

Contributing Editor

✉ freelancehack@gmail.com

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