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# **'It's not something new': Addressing human rights due diligence in seafood sourcing at Seafood Expo North America**

24 March 2025

By Jamie Wright

**Fishermen, NGOs and industry share tales of responsible sourcing struggles and strategies at Seafood Expo North America**



Fishermen, NGOs and industry representatives share tales of human rights due diligence work in seafood procurement at Seafood Expo North America. Photo by Jamie Wright.

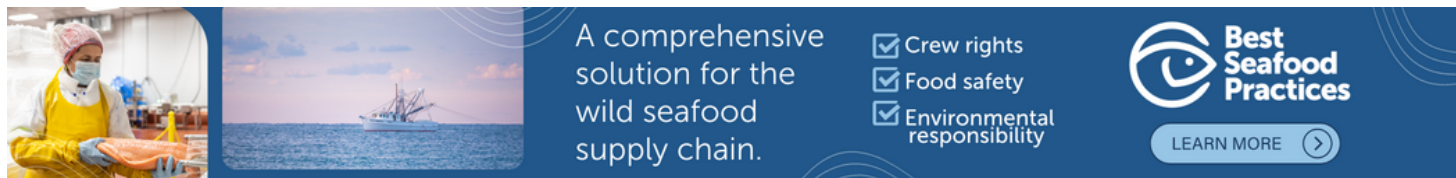
At last week's Seafood Expo North America (SENA), an annual trade event held at the massive Boston Exhibition and Convention Center, global seafood companies showcasing shrimp, tilapia and salmon products pulled out all the stops to stand out in a crowded marketplace. As always, seafood buyers had their hands full, wading through familiar claims of freshness, quality, taste and value as always. But this year, they also navigated a rising tide of sustainability pledges and food safety certifications – the criteria for today's seafood procurement professionals.

But an even bigger challenge loomed large: human rights. Over the past decade, human rights due diligence (HRDD) has rapidly climbed to the top of seafood procurement priorities, fueled partly by recent high-profile media reports exposing forced labor and worker abuses in seafood supply chains. Reflecting this urgency, the three-day SENA conference program featured multiple sessions dedicated to addressing labor abuses, ethical production and the complexity of mitigating risks within this notoriously fragmented industry.

## 'It's not something new'

In a session titled, "Navigating Human Rights Due Diligence in Seafood Procurement: Challenges, Best Practices and Next Steps," Ashley Aarons, senior private sector advisor for Oxfam US, warned attendees about the potential for increased litigation against seafood companies. He emphasized that companies could face heightened legal scrutiny related to forced labor incidents at production and processing facilities, in addition to the issues that have been recently exposed in the media.

Just this month, four fishermen from Indonesia filed a lawsuit against U.S. tuna company Bumble Bee Foods, alleging forced labor on fishing vessels that supply the company and its ubiquitous tins of tuna on supermarket shelves. About a year prior, France-based retailer Carrefour was identified among companies sourcing seafood products from Chinese processing facilities, where members of the Uyghur ethnic minority were allegedly forcibly relocated and compelled to work against their will.



(<https://bspcertification.org/>).

"I think the business case for stronger procurement is just going to increase," Aarons said. "And I think if any of you are concerned about what we're going to be suggesting here, the way I'd like to frame it is, 'You have made human rights commitments.' Those already exist, and it's about transferring those across the business into business practices. It's not something new. It's about bringing these commitments into the rest of the business. We have a number of initial steps that should make that easier, recognizing the commitment process."

Aarons added that Oxfam has observed increased awareness of the risks of forced labor risks within seafood supply chains, along with a growing demand for human rights impact assessments. Calling seafood a "higher risk" sector, Aarons said that HRDD work has long held a "something over there" connotation for some buyers, who may be thousands of miles removed from their suppliers. Aarons further pointed out that, unlike other sectors such as textiles, seafood lacks comprehensive procurement guidance for addressing labor issues.

Building long-term partnerships between buyers and suppliers, collaborative production planning and fair payment terms – clearly outlining how and when payments will be made – are crucial steps for derisking supply chains, Aarons said.

"What we're really trying to do is to find, to speak to businesses, to see what good practices they can share, who is leading the way here, to show to other businesses, to inspire them," he said.

## Staying engaged

Corey Peet, VP of sustainability for U.S. seafood importer Aqua Star, drew parallels between the industry's current human rights journey and the global effort to improve the sector's environmental performance about three decades ago. With extensive experience in nonprofit aquaculture improvement initiatives, Peet said few problems are solved by walking away from them.

"We have to be careful with solutions that are about forcing change and lean towards solutions that are more about fostering them. Because shame is not a solution, right? A solution is engagement," said Peet. "It's hard to understand, it's hard to gain reach. But from my perspective, our focus is really on that engagement, on training, and how can we constantly learn and improve."

The deep-sea fishing sector has increasingly come under scrutiny due to reports of forced labor and abusive work environments. During a session titled "Should I Stay or Should I Go? Navigating Supplier Relationships in the Seafood Sector in Response to Labor Abuses," Indonesian fisherman Silwanus Tangkotta shared his harrowing experiences working aboard tuna vessels, including a traumatic incident whereby he lost parts of two fingers yet was denied medical attention for weeks. Ultimately, he amputated portions of his own finger using toothpicks and a nail clipper, describing the pain as "unimaginable."

After finally getting onto land and his wounds healed, he was told that by his Taiwanese employer that he was a "burden to the company," was denied insurance for his injuries and was sent home because his job was finished.

## 'No single solution'

Allison Gill, legal director at Global Labor Justice, said Tangkotta's case was not a "one-off" and that end buyers are responsible for the treatment of workers in their supply chains.

"We see this type of treatment of workers on the high seas all the time. The whole seafood sector is not like that. But I just want everyone to be aware that Silwanus was working on a ship that was [part of] an MSC-certified (Marine Stewardship Council) fishery that is selling seafood for a premium to the U.S. market and is promoted as being a premium product that doesn't have that have issues," she said. "Yes, MSC has environmental claims, but everyone is aiming to buy MSC tuna ... it creates an impression that the seafood is much better than it actually is. We need to get more transparency and more ability for people like Silwanus to be able to tell exactly what the working conditions are like."

Marcelo Hidalgo, COO of the Fishing Industry Association of Papua New Guinea, says the Papua New Guinea (PNG) tuna fleet – one of the world's largest and diverse – represents 18 percent of global tuna catches. Despite managing a vast area with many small islands, the PNG tuna industry has spent more than two decades developing a workforce strategy plan, with efforts ramping up since COVID restrictions were lifted.

"We saw that the sustainability certification was not enough, it was not sufficient," said Hidalgo. "So we enhanced transparency in governments. We were the first fleet to release a **real-time vessel monitoring system with Global Fishing Watch** (<https://www.globalseafood.org/advocate/responsible-fisheries-innovation-award-finalist-global-fishing-watches-digital-tool-to-combat-iuu-fishing/>). Everybody can see where our fishing vessel groups are, how long they are there." Industry leaders comply with ILO conventions and get third-party assessments, but he admitted there's "no single solution" to human rights due diligence.

"We try to put together the best practices to take care of our crew members. Even the fishing license rights in Papua New Guinea request that fishing companies are responsible of the living and working conditions of crew members on board," he said.

*Editor's Note: Allison Gill, legal director at Global Labor Justice, was misidentified in the original post due to an error in the conference program.*

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