

## Opening Statement for Rep. Huffman

Thank you all for joining us today.

Last month, President Biden issued an executive order banning the import of Russian seafood—one of many sanctions put in place in response to the unprovoked and unjustified aggressions of Vladimir Putin that are wreaking havoc on the lives of millions of innocent people in Ukraine.

The United States imported more than \$1.2 billion of crab, cod, and other fish from Russia in 2021, and banning those imports is intended to ensure that U.S. consumers are not funding Putin's atrocities. While I fully support the President's goal, I regret to inform him that his well-intentioned ban, under current laws and policies, and under the less than watchful eye of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), will not have the desired effect.

Here's why:

As we have heard repeatedly in this Committee, NOAA only requires transparency and traceability for 13 species groups through its Seafood Import Monitoring Program, or SIMP, representing only about 40 percent of the species imported into the United States. SIMP requires importers to track fish from the initial catch, throughout the supply chain, to their entry into the United States.

There is no requirement for traceability for the remaining 60 percent of the species entering our markets, which includes most of the seafood originating in Russia—like pollock. So, while the Executive Order, in theory, is supposed to block seafood imported directly from Russia, how will it actually work if most of that seafood is not required to be tracked under SIMP? But it gets even more complicated.

Russia sends a significant amount of seafood to China for processing, hiding the true origins. In fact, **26 percent** of the fish caught in Russia is sent to other countries for processing, making it a product of the other country. Unless that fish is one of the 13 species currently covered by SIMP—and we know most of it is not--the Russian origins are not traceable, and the ban impossible to enforce.

But, if NOAA required SIMP for all species, we could ban ALL seafood imports from Russia. Until that happens, Russian seafood will continue to line grocery store shelves in the United States, and U.S. consumers will continue to unwittingly support Putin's madness.

The ineffectiveness of the Russian seafood ban is just one example of the many reasons I have and many others have long advocated for NOAA to expand SIMP to cover all seafood imported to the US.

In fact, when NOAA first developed the SIMP program to address illegal fishing, seafood fraud, and slave labor in the seafood supply chain, they explicitly stated in the final rule that they planned to expand the program to cover all species. Since then, story after story demonstrates the need to expand, but NOAA consistently refuses to do so. And, even more disappointing, NOAA refused to testify at this hearing today.

During my tenure as Chair of this Subcommittee, we have held several hearings highlighting the need for full transparency and traceability of all seafood entering the U.S. to ensure that seafood resulting from IUU fishing, fraud, or slave labor in the supply chain is not being sold in our supermarkets and restaurants.

The bill I introduced alongside Congressman Graves, H.R. 3075, the *Illegal Fishing and Forced Labor Prevention Act*, would do just that. The *America COMPETES Act* includes critical components of our bill and must be enacted – especially given NOAA’s resistance to act and blatant disregard for appropriately dealing with these issues despite what we have learned over the years.

We heard from Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Ian Urbina who told us about a Cambodian migrant, held captive on a trawler at sea for three years and shackled by the neck, catching fish destined for American shelves. NOAA was actually *at* that hearing, but has not acted.

We have learned about the deadly secret of China’s fishing vessels illegally fishing in North Korean waters, violently displacing smaller North Korean boats, killing fishermen, and catalyzing a more than 70 percent decline in once-abundant squid stocks. Squid is also not covered by SIMP, and we continue to import it from China. And yet, NOAA has not acted.

We have learned that the Department of Labor identified 68 seafood species produced by slave or child labor that we import into the United States, but SIMP only covers 12 of these seafood species. And still, NOAA has not acted.

We have learned that SIMP only covers 29% of seafood imports from China, a notoriously bad actor – almost 60% of offenses in the industrial fishing sector are related to Chinese-owned vessels, according to a new study. But, despite pressure from both sides of the aisle to be tougher on China – NOAA has not acted.

Finally, we have learned that SIMP doesn’t cover many Russian seafood products, like pollock and salmon even though Russia is engaged in IUU Fishing. Government reports estimate that over 16 percent of seafood imports from Russia were obtained through IUU fishing. But, I think you know by now that NOAA has not acted.

Seafood traceability is imperative for preventing the illegal importation of Russian-derived, often IUU-related, seafood into the United States. NOAA must immediately take steps to expand SIMP so that we can keep slave-caught, illegal, and Russian seafood out of this country and stop funding Putin’s horrific war.

I am eager to discuss this critical and timely topic and look forward to the invaluable testimony of our invited witnesses. As noted, it is regrettable that NOAA chose not to appear before the Committee today, but I appreciate those of you who made the time to be with us.

With that, I will turn it over to the Ranking Member for his opening remarks.