

Gabriel Prout
President
Alaska Bering Sea Crabbers

United States Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation's
Subcommittee on Coast Guard, Maritime, and Fisheries

Finding Nemo's Future: Conflicts over Ocean Resources
June 12, 2025

Chairman Sullivan, Ranking Member Blunt Rochester, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the devastating impact of illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) crab fishing and unfair trade practices by Russia on American crab fishermen and coastal communities. I also want to thank both Senators Sullivan and Cantwell for their longtime support of independent crab harvesters. My name is Gabriel Prout, and I am the president of the Alaska Bering Sea Crabbers (ABSC), representing the majority of the quota and vessel owners who harvest king, snow, and bairdi crab in the Bering Sea.

I am also a third-generation commercial fisherman from Kodiak, Alaska—a seafood powerhouse that is known for the 100s of millions of pounds of product that come across its docks each year. For nearly two decades, I have worked in the Bering Sea and Gulf of Alaska alongside two of my brothers, continuing the livelihood passed down from our father and grandfather.

In recent years, the collapse of the snow and red king crab stocks has hit our community hard. Boats sat tied to the dock, crews were out of work, and families like mine were left facing deep uncertainty. This fishery is not just our livelihood—it is our identity. Today, I am happy to report that crab stocks appear to be making a recovery, but more is still needed to be done to help protect small fishing families like mine and those that I represent in the Bering Sea crab fleet, especially when it comes to IUU.

IUU Impact on U.S. Fishermen

The scale of economic losses from IUU fishing on American fishermen is staggering. U.S. fishermen are losing \$1 billion in revenue per year due to illegal seafood imports. This represents approximately 20% of what American fishermen should be earning under fair market conditions.

For over two decades, Russian IUU crab fishing has undermined the economic foundation of America's legitimate crab fishing industry. The economic impact on Alaskan crab fishermen has been enormous. A 2021 report by the U.S. International Trade Commission estimated that in

2019, 20.8% of U.S. Imports of both snow and king crab in the Russian Far East were a product of IUU fishing. Thankfully, due to the trade embargo which began under President Biden and continued under President Trump, the U.S. imports of Russian crab has essentially ceased. This also was made possible by Senator Sullivan's work to close the loophole that allowed Russian seafood to enter the U.S. through China.

Despite Port State agreements aimed at curbing illegal fishing that Russia signed a decade ago with several trading partners, enforcement has been inconsistent and IUU fishing is still occurring according to recent media sources inside Russia. Russian fishing operations continue to impact global markets with illegally harvested crab, suppressing prices and creating unfair competition for law-abiding American fishermen who follow strict quotas, safety regulations, and sustainable fishing practices.

Unfair Trade Practices, Forced Labor, and Market Manipulation

Russia has engaged in systematic unfair trade practices and human rights abuses that go far beyond traditional IUU fishing. Russia has significantly increased government subsidies for its seafood industry as part of a deliberate strategy to undercut American competitors. These subsidies allow Russian producers to sell seafood below fair market prices.

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Russia began to flood the international market with underpriced seafood, including crab, to help fund its war effort. Fishermen have suffered amid cratering prices due to Russia flooding markets with artificially cheap seafood. This is a major contributing factor to unprecedented challenges faced by the Alaska seafood industry in recent years including an estimated \$1.8 billion in losses in 2022-2023.

According to a 2023 Financial Transparency Coalition report, Russia also ranked among the top countries with fishing vessels accused of forced labor. Forced labor in Russian fishing also represents a significant component of broader human rights abuses and another way in which the Russian fishing industry engages in IUU fishing.

National Security Concerns

There are numerous national security implications involving Russia's involvement in IUU fishing. Particularly concerning is the use of North Korean smuggling networks to launder Russian crab into global markets. North Korea has extensive experience in sanctions evasion, including seafood trafficking through China. These established smuggling routes and networks are now being exploited to move Russian crab through North Korea to China, where it can be reprocessed and relabeled as "product of China" before entering the global market.

The North Korean connection is particularly troubling because it involves collaboration between two sanctioned regimes to undermine trade restrictions. This represents a direct threat to U.S. national security interests beyond just economic competition.

Russian fisheries also present a significant national security threat through their dual-use capabilities that blur the lines between commercial fishing and state-sponsored espionage operations. Recent actions by a major Russian fishing company exemplifies this threat as its vessels exhibit suspicious movement patterns inconsistent with normal fishing activities, instead repeatedly loitering near critical infrastructure and military installations in the North and Baltic Seas. These activities are part of a broader Russian surveillance campaign that weaponizes civilian fishing vessels for espionage missions targeting both civilian and military infrastructure, potentially facilitating future sabotage operations. The vessels have been equipped with specialized technology for intelligence gathering, with at least one vessel banned from Dutch ports due to espionage concerns.

Recommendations

Based on years of experience witnessing the impact of Russian IUU fishing on Alaskan crab fishermen, I respectfully urge the following actions:

1. Strengthen Import Controls and Traceability

The Administration and Congress should mandate comprehensive seafood traceability systems that track crab products that include:

- Enhancing the capabilities of the Seafood Import Monitoring Program and ensuring that it only apply to the most at-risk species of IUU fishing.
- Enhanced screening for products from known transshipment routes, particularly those involving China.
- Mandatory country-of-origin labeling that applies to cooked crab and cannot be circumvented by processing in third countries.

2. Expand Economic Sanctions and Trade Restrictions

The Administration and Congress should expand economic and trade restrictions on Russian seafood and include:

- Continuing the prohibition on all Russian seafood imports, including those processed through third countries.
- Imposing secondary sanctions on entities that facilitate Russian seafood transshipment schemes.
- Imposing Section 301 tariffs on Russian seafood in the event that the Russian seafood ban is lifted.

3. Increase International Cooperation and Enforcement

Congress should authorize and fund:

- Enhanced satellite monitoring of fishing activities in the Bering Sea and other shared waters.
- Intelligence sharing agreements with allied nations to track vessel movements and identify smuggling networks.
- Support for international bodies combating IUU fishing.

4. Provide Economic Relief for Affected Communities

Congress should establish:

- Emergency economic assistance for fishing communities impacted by unfair competition, similar to the Seafood Trade Relief Program.
- Loan programs to help fishing operations modernize and improve competitiveness.
- Market development initiatives to promote American-caught seafood.

5. Strengthen U.S. Fishery Legislation to Combat IUU Fishing

Congress should:

- Pass S. 688, the Fish Act, a bill that would direct the Administration to address IUU fishing in international agreements, establish an IUU vessel list, and develop new technologies to combat IUU fishing, among many other important provisions.
- Direct and fund the U.S. Coast Guard to increase efforts to combat IUU fishing.

Conclusion

For more than two decades, Russian IUU crab fishing has undermined American fishermen who play by the rules, invest in sustainable practices, and support coastal communities across Alaska. The economic losses documented by industry analysts represent more than statistics—they represent lost livelihoods, struggling communities, and an industry fighting for survival against unfair competition.

As more countries around the globe move to ban Russian seafood and implement seafood traceability systems, they are looking to the US as a global leader. Congress has the opportunity to lead by example, protecting American fishermen while promoting sustainable fishing practices worldwide.

The time for half-measures has passed. American fishermen deserve a level playing field, and American consumers deserve confidence that the seafood on their tables was harvested legally and sustainably. I urge this Committee to take decisive action to address IUU fishing. The Committee has an opportunity to support the hardworking men and women who make their living from America's marine resources.

Thank you for your attention to this critical issue affecting thousands of American fishing families. I look forward to answering your questions and collaborating with the Committee to develop effective solutions.