

EU under fire after lifting threat to ban Thai seafood imports over illegal fishing

Reversal of disciplinary process condemned as campaigners claim Thailand has failed to address labour abuses

Friday 11 January 2019, by [HODAL Kate](#) (Date first published: 10 January 2019).

The EU has been accused of sending out the wrong message after removing Thailand from a list of countries failing to tackle illegal fishing.

Campaigners claim that the [European commission's decision](#) this week to lift Thailand's "yellow card", [in place since April 2015](#), gives consumers an "illusion that violations of fishers' rights are not still occurring".

"It's not clear what data the European commission is using to base its decision to lift the yellow card," said Johnny Hansen, chair of fisheries at the [International Transport Workers' Federation](#).

"[But] reports we have from fishers on the ground in Thailand are telling us that there's still illegal fishing happening and, more importantly, there is still significant labour abuse and debt bondage in the industry."

The EU lifted the yellow card on Tuesday, after finding that Thailand had "successfully addressed" significant shortcomings in its billion-dollar fisheries sector through stricter regulation of illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing. Improvements included remote monitoring of fishing at sea and "robust" inspections at port.

Thailand, the world's third largest seafood exporter, [risked an EU-wide import ban](#) had it failed to take action to meet minimum requirements imposed by the European commission.

But Hansen said the implementation and enforcement of Thailand's new fisheries regulations was so weak that human trafficking, debt bondage, document retention and poor working conditions remained a significant component of its fishing industry, preventing it from being truly ethical or sustainable.

"We've interviewed hundreds of fishers who've told us that that the changes made to the inspection frameworks aren't sufficient to detect abuse and have basically been put in place to create a picture that the reforms are working," said Hansen.

An Amnesty International [report on Thailand's seafood industry last year](#) found that nearly 40% of fishers interviewed had been trafficked into the industry, and that labour inspections at ports were "largely a theatrical exercise for international consumption". The study's findings called into question a [2015 Thai government report on human trafficking](#) in which inspections of nearly 475,000 fishery workers failed to identify a single case of forced labour.

Thailand has become the first country in Asia to ratify the [work in fishing convention 188](#), which sets out binding requirements to ensure decent working conditions. Steve Trent of the Environmental Justice Foundation, which has worked with Thailand to address IUU fishing since 2015, said activists hoped the lifting of the yellow card would not allow “complacency to set in”.

“We need to ensure that the positive changes in Thailand are durable, and durable countrywide across political transition, with [elections hopefully coming soon](#),” said Trent.

“We recognise the critical role of the EU commission and the constructive leadership it has shown on this issue, that has leveraged such changes. Now it’s up to Thailand to deliver actions that meet the promise.”

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