

April 7, 2022

More Action Needed to Ban Russian Seafood

Weak U.S. Regulations are Preventing a U.S. Ban on Russian Seafood, and Some Countries are Facilitating Russian Fishing Activities and Port Visits

Background

- In 2021, the United States imported over \$1.2 billion worth of Russian seafood. During the month of January 2022, the United States imported more than \$171 million worth of Russian seafood, which is almost twice the amount compared to January 2021.
- With the crisis unfolding in Ukraine, almost every sector of the global economy has pushed economic sanctions on Russia, and seafood is no exception. In the United States, President Biden issued an [executive order](#) on March 11, 2022 banning the import of Russian seafood and other goods.
- To enforce this ban, traceability of seafood and transparency of fishing are needed to ensure that the ban is truly effective so Russian seafood does not slip through regulatory loopholes.
- The Seafood Import Monitoring Program (SIMP) requires seafood at risk of illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing and seafood fraud to have catch documentation and traceability to the point of import. This program currently only applies to 13 species groups, amounting to about 40% of the seafood imported into the United States.
- According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's [U.S. Trade in Fisheries Products Data](#) from 2021, only two species imported from Russia to the United States are covered by SIMP out of 71 seafood products. The two products covered by SIMP are red king crab (*Paralithodes camtschaticus*) and Atlantic cod (*Gadus morhua*). Red king crab comprises 17% of seafood imports from Russia by volume and 35% by value.
- The U.S. ban on Russian seafood imports is unlikely to have the intended effects of keeping Russian seafood out of the U.S. market. Because 82% of Russian seafood imports to the United States are not required to submit catch documentation or be traced back to their point of capture, this presents an opportunity for Russian seafood products to enter the U.S. market in violation of President Biden's executive order.
- The Russian seafood ban is nearly impossible to enforce without requiring all seafood imports to be covered under SIMP, meaning they need catch documentation and to be traced back to the farm or fishing vessel, through the entire supply chain from net to the U.S. border.
- Russia can easily evade the ban due to the lack of seafood traceability requirements. The United States' [Country of Origin Labeling rule](#) allows Russian-caught seafood to be labeled "product of China" once it is sent there for processing. The foreign processing of seafood enables Russia to mask the country of origin, allowing Russian-caught seafood to continue to enter the United States, despite the ban.
- This loophole limits traceability in the seafood supply chain and makes it difficult to know the true origin of seafood imports.

[A Snapshot of Russian Fishing Activities \(2019-2021\)](#)

- More than 1,000 fishing vessels are flagged to Russia worldwide. These vessels are primarily trawlers, but Russian fishing vessels also use longlines, pot and traps, and gillnets.
- Russian vessels appeared to fish* nearly 5 million hours within their own EEZ from 2019-2021. They also have an active distant-water fleet on the high seas, where Russian vessels appeared to fish for more than 250,000 hours in areas beyond the national jurisdiction of other nations.
- Several countries allow Russian fishing vessels to operate in their national waters. In Norwegian waters, Russian vessels fished a total of over 550,000 hours in a three-year period. Russian vessels also appeared to fish in the waters of Japan (283,992 hours), Denmark (54,432 hours), and Mauritania (33,211 hours).
- Russia also heavily fished the waters of Ukraine, primarily around the Crimean Peninsula, for more than 70,000 hours during this same three-year period.
- Between 2019 and 2021, there were 158 instances in which a refrigerated cargo ship, or “reefer,” encountered both Russian and non-Russian fishing vessels on the same voyage. Transshipment, or the meeting of vessels at sea to transfer fish, fuel, or supplies, enables fishing vessels to remain at sea for longer periods of time and fish farther from shore. While transshipment can be legal, it can also facilitate the laundering of illegal seafood products.
- These reefers are not always inspected upon arrival to port and can be exempt from providing catch documentation, which hinders seafood traceability and transparency. Reefers that only transshipped with Russian fishing vessels entered ports in Naknek, USA (94 visits); Busan, South Korea (33 visits); Bjornoya, Svalbard (27 visits); Hanasaki, Japan (20 visits); Kirkenes, Norway (19 visits); and Bellsund, Svalbard (13 visits) between 2019 and 2021.
- The [IUU Fishing Index](#) ranks nations based on how effectively they combat IUU fishing and how exposed their waters are to these illicit practices. Currently Russia ranks #2 out of 152 nations for poor performance on IUU fishing issues. Russia was formerly ranked #4 out of 152 indicating that their behavior has worsened since 2019. Their score was primarily affected by the number of their distant-water fishing vessels and whether any vessels are included on IUU lists, as well as not being a contracting party or cooperating non-contracting party to any regional fisheries management organizations in which their vessels fish.

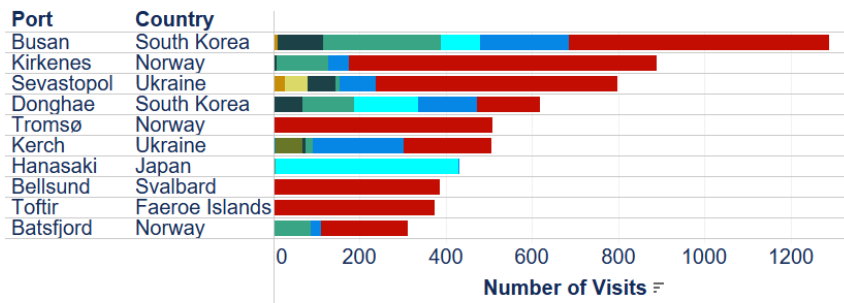
[Top Ports Visited by Russian Fishing Vessels \(2019-2021\)](#)

- Russian vessels (both fishing and non-fishing) visited ports in 144 countries, and Russian fishing vessels visited 50 different countries between 2019 and 2021.
- Outside of Russian ports, Russian-flagged fishing vessels primarily entered ports in South Korea and Norway. There were nearly 2,000 instances of Russian fishing vessels entering the ports of Busan and Donghae in South Korea. Busan was the most popular non-Russian port for Russian fishing vessels from 2019-2021. In Norway, there were over 1,900 port visits, primarily in Kirkenes, Tromsø, and Batsfjord. Russian vessels also visited ports in Crimea: Sevastapol, and Kerch (over 1,600 visits). Other ports popular with Russian fishing vessels include Hanasaki, Japan (431 visits), Bellsund, Svalbard (385 visits), and Toftir, Faroe Islands (375 visits).

- Since the invasion of Ukraine, there has been little change to the ports Russian vessels are entering, with vessels still primarily visiting the same ports from the past 3 years.
- Currently none of these frequently visited countries have explicitly banned port access or fishing by Russian vessels.



Total Number of Visits of Russian-Flagged Fishing Vessels by Gear Type to Each Port



- Gear Type**
- Trawlers
 - Unspecified Fishing
 - Pots and Traps
 - Set Longlines
 - Fixed Gear
 - Purse Seines
 - Set Gillnets
 - Other Purse Seines
 - Pole and Line
 - Tuna Purse Seines

Quotes

“Oceana’s analysis reveals that Russian fishing vessels have access to ports and fishing authorizations across the globe,” said Dr. Marla Valentine, illegal fishing and transparency campaign manager at Oceana. “Withdrawing port access, denying fishing rights, and banning imports can be powerful sanctions in addition to banning seafood from Russia. The countries identified in Oceana’s analysis, especially those most frequented by Russian vessels, should decide whether Russia’s actions in Ukraine warrant the continued privilege of port access or fishing in their waters. For any ban on Russian seafood to be effective, there must be boat-to-plate traceability for all seafood.”

Beth Lowell, Oceana’s acting vice president for the United States, had the following reaction to the U.S. ban on Russian seafood, which is also a topic of discussion in the [April 7 House Natural Resources Subcommittee on Water, Oceans, and Wildlife hearing](#):

“Oceana applauds President Biden’s ban on Russian seafood imports to ensure Americans are not supporting the devastating and senseless attack on Ukraine. In order to ensure that Russian seafood does not reach our borders or our plates, we need to expand documentation and traceability requirements for all seafood. Russian-caught seafood may be sent to other countries like China for processing, so it is imperative that the U.S. has a clear picture of both where fish is caught and the path it took to get to the U.S. to ensure that Russian products are truly banned from the U.S.

Russian fisheries have limited monitoring and environmental oversight, yet the U.S. imported over \$1.2 billion worth of Russian seafood last year, forcing U.S. fishers to compete in the marketplace over similar seafood products like salmon, pollock, snow crab, and king crab that are caught by U.S. fisheries in Alaska. Traceability for all seafood will ensure that Russia has no place in the U.S. seafood supply chain, Russian seafood products will not reach American plates, and American dollars will not support this needless war.”

*Any and all references to “fishing” should be understood in the context of Global Fishing Watch’s fishing detection algorithm, which is a best effort to determine “apparent fishing effort” based on vessel speed and direction data from the Automatic Identification System (AIS) collected via satellites and terrestrial receivers. As AIS data varies in completeness, accuracy and quality, it is possible that some fishing effort is not identified and conversely, that some fishing effort identified is not fishing. For these reasons, Global Fishing Watch qualifies all designations of vessel fishing effort, including synonyms of the term “fishing effort,” such as “fishing” or “fishing activity,” as “apparent,” rather than certain. Any/all Global Fishing Watch information about “apparent fishing effort” should be considered an estimate and must be relied upon solely at your own risk. Global Fishing Watch is taking steps to make sure fishing effort designations are as accurate as possible.