Prawns sold in Australia linked to alleged slavery in Thai fishing industry

The Australian arm of prawn farmer Charoen Pokphand Foods denounces slavery and promises audit of its supply chain

The Australian arm of a seafood company alleged to have slavery in its supply chain has circulated a statement addressing concerns raised by a Guardian UK investigation, saying the entire operation would be audited.

On Tuesday the Guardian revealed the world’s largest prawn farmer, Thailand-based Charoen Pokphand (CP) Foods, buys fishmeal, which it feeds to its farmed prawns, from some suppliers that own, operate or buy from fishing boats manned with slaves.

“A six-month investigation has established that large numbers of men bought and sold like animals and held against their will on fishing boats off Thailand are integral to the production of prawns (commonly called shrimp in the US) sold in leading supermarkets around the world, including the top four global retailers: Walmart, Carrefour, Costco and Tesco,” the Guardian reported.

In 2012, CP Foods opened a Melbourne office, and according to its official Facebook page the brand’s “Authentic Asia” range of frozen meals are supplied to Woolworths, Costco, 7-Eleven and selected IGA stores.

The group’s general manager for Australia, New Zealand and Pacific Islands, Richard Lovell, circulated a statement on Thursday afternoon from CP Foods’ headquarters in Thailand.
“Fundamentally CP believes that from factory to fishing boat each and every person who works for CP, with CP as a supplier or through any part of CP’s supply chain must, as an absolute minimum be treated fairly and with dignity at all times,” the statement said.

“To this end we are currently in the process of auditing our entire operation so that we can denounce slavery across each and every aspect of our supply chain.”

Long-term the company would commit to tightening the control of fishmeal procurement in order to clamp down on illegal, unregulated and uncertified fishing, the statement said.

“CP are the only representatives of the entire industry who have been prepared to face the cameras and answer questions,” it added.

The regional marketing manager of Costco Wholesale in Australia, Kyla White, said the company had reviewed Guardian UK reports concerning labour abuses in the Thai fishing industry.

The agreements that Costco Wholesale had with its suppliers prohibited the use of slave labour and other violations of labour law, she said.

“We are committed to working with our suppliers of Thai shrimp to require them to take corrective action to police their feedstock sources with respect to poor labour practices,” she said.

“This commitment so far has involved visits by our buying staff to Thailand and discussions with the Thai government, our suppliers and other industry participants.”
The communications manager of 7-Eleven, Tracy Hammon, said the chain currently carried one CP Foods product. “However, as part of our normal range review process, we have recently decided to stop ranging this product as it does not meet sales benchmarks,” she said. “We are therefore in the processing of exiting the remaining volume of this one product from our stores.”

Woolworths and IGA have not yet responded to requests for comment from Guardian Australia.

The Seafood Importers Association of Australia executive chairman, Norman Grant, said it was extremely unlikely that any seafood products from Asia on sale for human consumption in Australia would be from sources where workers had been trafficked or mistreated.

“That’s largely because most of the seafood Australia imports from Asia comes from aquaculture, not wild catch,” Grant said. “Hence, not directly from Thai fishing boats – the sector where most serious abuse cases now occur.”

The association had been working for many years to find solutions to the enormous social problems faced by Thailand in dealing with millions of immigrant workers, many of whom are illegal and find employment in seafood-related sectors such as processing factories, he said.

Members of the association are asked to seek written assurance that their suppliers comply with local labour laws, are signed on to industry conventions and initiatives on labour welfare, and provide evidence of a systematic approach to ensuring supply chains are free of labour abuse.

Grant said the association took the issue of slave labour seriously, but also pointed out the problems faced by Thailand such as immigration across vast geographical areas, borders and oceans.
“Thailand has essentially been left to sort this out by itself, under the spotlight of an unforgiving and largely unhelpful western consumer morality,” he said.