

EU postpones announcement of plan to cut fishing fleets

EU spokesperson denies charge that delay is political

By Associated Press

Apr. 23 - WorldCatch News Network - The European Commission postponed plans to propose sweeping cuts in Europe's fishing fleet Tuesday as part of a drive to protect declining fish stocks.

The European Union's head office had been expected to approve plans Wednesday to cut the number of fishing boats in EU waters by over a third, but the issue was taken off the agenda.

Commission spokesman Jonathan Faull said more work was needed on the proposal. He declined to confirm reports that political pressure had forced the delay.



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The Spanish daily El Pais reported the governments of Spain, France, Portugal and Italy were trying to scrap or dilute the proposal.

Faull confirmed Spanish Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar had discussed the issue over the weekend in a phone conversation with EU Commission President Romano Prodi.

The issue is particularly sensitive in Spain, which has the EU's largest fishing fleet. The French government has

also expressed opposition to the plan and is wary of upsetting fishermen.

Faull denied suggestions the postponement was to avoid playing into the hands of French far-right presidential candidate Jean-Marie Le Pen who has accused mainstream politicians of acquiescing in EU decisions to the detriment of French national interests.

"The work being done on this subject has nothing to do with the French elections," Faull told reporters, adding that it will likely be adopted in the coming weeks.

EU Fisheries Commissioner Franz Fischler says the fleet cuts and other reforms are needed to save the fishing industry, which has been pushed to the brink of collapse by dwindling stocks of popular species such as cod and hake.

His proposals are also expected to include an overhaul of the EU's subsidy and catch quota system, new rules on the shape and size of nets to prevent landings of small fish, and tighter enforcement of fishing regulations.

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