

Scientists call on WTO to slash fishing subsidies

In a declaration addressed to WTO Director General Pascal Lamy, the group warned that overfishing would damage the ecosystem of the globe's oceans beyond recovery unless government subsidies were reduced soon, Reuters reports.

"The WTO has a once-in-a-lifetime chance to demonstrate that it can not only balance trade and the environment, but make one of the greatest contributions to protecting the world's oceans," said Andrew Sharpless, one of the signatories.

He urged Lamy to employ his "skill and leadership" to ensure that a global-scale reduction was achieved.

Some 125 scientists from 27 countries signed the declaration, sponsored by marine conservation professor Daniel Pauly of the University of British Columbia (UBC) and marine biologist Boris Worm from Dalhousie University, both from Canada.

The issue of fish subsidies has been brought up at the WTO's Doha Round of global talks on lowering trade barriers that began in 2001.

"The WTO needs to seize the opportunity presented by the fisheries subsidies negotiations to address global overfishing because - as the world's leading scientists have declared - if we wait it will be too late," said Sharpless.

"It is up to the WTO to call a halt to this short-sighted race to capture the last fish in the ocean," added Sharpless, who fronts the campaigning group Oceana.

Earlier in May, Oceana and the World Wildlife Foundation (WWF) called on the 150 countries that make up the WTO to support a US proposal on terminating subsidies that have bloated the size of world fishing fleets.

Scientific studies cited by both groups say the world's fishing stocks are plummeting and could collapse within 50 years if current trends continue.

Total fishing subsidies, which include funding for research and stock management, are estimated at around USD 34 billion a year, or a third of the sector's overall annual sales.

The group said the biggest sources of subsidies were Japan at USD 5.3 billion a year, the European Union (EU) at USD 3.3 billion, and China at USD 3.1 billion.

Some WTO members, however, argue that such a drastic reduction in subsidies would deprive thousands of fishermen of their jobs and livelihood. (FIS)