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Environment groups want fish protected in WTO deal

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By Laura MacInnis

GENEVA, May 1 (Reuters) - State subsidies that encourage overfishing should be banned under any World Trade Organisation (WTO) free trade pact, environmental groups said on Tuesday.

Conservationist groups WWF and Oceana urged countries negotiating a new WTO deal to back a U.S. proposal on ending incentives that have vastly expanded the size of the world's fishing industry, pressuring stocks worldwide and threatening extinction for many species.

"We are pouring billions of dollars into overfishing today. That is just madness in a world where fish stocks are depleting in every ocean," WWF Senior Fellow David Schorr said.

Scientists have warned that the world's fisheries are on a steep decline and could collapse beyond repair within 50 years if current trends continue. More than 1 billion people worldwide depend on fish as their primary source of protein.

Total fishing subsidies, including money for things like research and stock management, are estimated at \$34 billion a year, a third of the value of the sector's overall sales.

Capacity-increasing subsidies, including government supports for ships, fuel, or fishing equipment, are believed to add up to about \$20 billion a year worldwide.

The U.S. proposal includes a broad ban on subsidies that encourage overcapacity and overfishing, including for the buying of fishing vessels and their running costs. It also sets limits on remaining subsidies and requires countries to disclose the assistance they give to the industry.

"Strong action by the WTO will help control the 'race to fish' that is the core of the problem," Washington's WTO Ambassador Peter Allgeier said in remarks to a two-day WTO negotiating session, which began on Tuesday.

While countries with big fishing interests voiced differing views, some such as Japan and Canada showed openness to an eventual deal. Europe did not attack the U.S. proposal outright and the most vocal opposition came from Norway, diplomats said.

Any agreement on fisheries would be included in the WTO's long-stalled Doha free trade round, which is bogged down in differences over agricultural and industrial tariffs.

Allgeier dismissed any chance of fishing being negotiated as a stand-alone pact if the Doha round grinds to a halt.

"We are working under the assumption that there will be a single undertaking, a successful Doha round, and therefore this will fit into there," he told reporters at the WTO.



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