

U.S. Senate backs ban on destructive fishing subsidies

SEAFOOD.COM NEWS [PR Newswire] - May 7, 2007 - WASHINGTON, A bipartisan group of 13 United States Senators, led by Sen. Ted Stevens (R-Alaska), introduced a resolution Thursday night calling for the United States to pursue an international ban on government subsidies to the fishing sector that are supporting the overfishing of the world's oceans.

Earlier this week, the United States Ambassador to the World Trade Organization (WTO), Peter Allgeier, presented an ambitious U.S. proposal that would broadly prohibit fisheries subsidies at WTO negotiations in Geneva including delegates representing the WTO's 150-member countries.

Worldwide fisheries subsidies are estimated at \$30 to \$34 billion annually -- levels equal to approximately 25 percent of world fishing revenue. At least \$20 billion are 'harmful' subsidies that drive increased and intensified fishing by providing support for boat construction and modernization, fishing equipment and fuel and other operational costs.

The United States is involved in ongoing WTO negotiations as part of the Doha trade 'round' to strengthen the international rules on fisheries subsidies, including through the prohibition of subsidies that contribute to overcapacity and overfishing. This week is the first time that the United States proposal, which was submitted in March, has been discussed in the WTO fisheries subsidies negotiations.

'The WTO can produce the single greatest action to protect the world's oceans by eliminating overfishing subsidies,' said Courtney Sakai, campaign director at Oceana. 'The strong bipartisan showing by the United States Senate to stop destructive fishing subsidies continues to demonstrate the commitment of the Congress and the Bush Administration towards achieving an ambitious outcome in the WTO negotiations.'

Along with Senator Stevens, other co-sponsors of the resolution include Sen. Daniel Inouye (D-Hawaii), Sen. Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.), Sen. Maria Cantwell (D-WA), Sen. Thad Cochran (R-Miss.), Sen. Susan Collins (R-ME), Sen. John Kerry (D-Mass.), Sen. Mary Landrieu (D-La.), Sen. Trent Lott (R-Miss.), Sen. Patty Murray (D-WA), Sen. Lisa Murkowski (R-AK.), Sen. Olympia J. Snowe (R-ME), and Sen. John Sununu (R-N.H.). The Senate resolution follows a series of recent actions by the U.S. Congress to address domestic and international overfishing. Last year, the U.S. Congress enacted the requirement to end overfishing by 2011 in U.S. fisheries in its reauthorization of the Magnuson- Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act. In March, a resolution on fisheries subsidies (H.Con.Res.94) was introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives by Rep. Madeleine Bordallo (D-Guam), chairwoman of the Natural Resources Subcommittee on Fisheries, Oceans and Wildlife.

'The world's fisheries are near total collapse, yet many governments continue to sponsor overfishing with the billions of dollars in subsidies they dole out to the fishing sector,' continued Sakai. 'To end overfishing, follow the money that supports it and make the money stop.'

The largest overall fishing subsidizers are Japan (\$5.3 billion), the European Union (\$3.3 billion), and China (\$3.1 billion). The United States provides relatively few capacity-building subsidies to its domestic fishing industry, and continued subsidization by other governments to their commercial fleets put domestic fishermen at competitive disadvantage in their ability to fish and to sell their products on the international market.

Fisheries subsidies also preserve uneconomic and inefficient practices. A recent study found that high seas bottom trawling would not be profitable without high levels of government subsidies. This fishing practice is destructive enough that the United Nations has called for it to be severely restricted - an action supported by President Bush, Senator Stevens and other members of Congress. Fisheries subsidies have also been documented to support illegal, unregulated, and unreported (IUU) fishing, sometimes referred to as 'pirate fishing.'