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Commercial Fishing Reaps Billions

From a Environmental Working Group press release:

U.S. and state fishing subsidy programs have contributed more than \$6.4 billion to commercial fishing operations between 1996 and 2004, accelerating depletion of once-bountiful fish species, according to a ground-breaking study by Renée Sharp, director of the Environmental Working Group (EWG) California Office and economist Ussif Rashid Sumaila, acting director of the Fisheries Centre at the University of British Columbia.

"The Obama administration's task is clear," said EWG Executive Director Richard Wiles. "It's up to the new administration to move aggressively to end harmful subsidy programs that are causing pollution and global warming and have pushed some species to the brink of extinction."



The study, supported by the Lenfest Ocean Program - www.lenfestocean.org - and published today in the North American Journal of Fisheries Management, documents how government subsidies amounting to 21 percent of the \$31 billion fish harvest between 1996 and 2004 have helped enable the American fishing industry to expand far beyond the level at which its operations could be safely sustained. As a result, the U.S. commercial fishing fleet has over-exploited marine fish stocks, in some cases to the danger point.

"With help from the U.S. taxpayers, fishing operations have bought many more boats, fuel and equipment than the oceans may be able to handle," Sharp said. "Like other government supports, harmful fishing subsidies have contributed to the destruction of the already fragile ecosystem off our shores."

"Harmful American fisheries subsidies have partly underwritten the expansion of commercial fishing operations, encouraging overfishing and intensifying the depletion of important fisheries," Dr. Ussif Rashid Sumaila said.

Fishing subsidies have significant environmental impacts that stretch beyond the sea. Unlike trucking companies and motorists, commercial fishing operations have been exempt from federal and state fuel taxes, which the study estimates at \$2.8 billion between 1996 and 2004. According to a 2008 World Bank report, for every ton of fish caught, commercial fishing boats use almost half a ton of fuel, much of it wasted as too many boats chase too few fish.

World Bank: The Sunken Billions: The Economic Justification for Fisheries Reform

The Sharp-Sumaila study is the first to attempt a detailed accounting of individual U.S. fishing subsidy programs on both state and federal levels and is perhaps the most in-depth examination of fishing

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subsidies ever conducted for any country.

In December 2006, the U.S. Congress passed ambitious reforms calling for an end to overfishing by 2011 and setting mandatory annual catch limits for species subject to overfishing. The measure, which amended the Magnuson Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act and was signed by President Bush on January 12, 2007, does not address subsidies, and not enough time has passed to evaluate its effectiveness. Yet it is nonetheless encouraging, as it represents the strongest Congressional mandate ever enacted to curb the serious problem of overfishing.

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