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Deal reached to manage fishing in Northeast Pacific

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By Allan Dowd

VANCOUVER (Reuters) - Countries bordering the North Pacific Ocean have struck a deal that environmentalists said on Monday will help protect 16.1 million square miles (41.7 million sq km) of ocean floor from a destructive technique called bottom trawl fishing.

The agreement calls for the creation of an organization to manage sea bottom fisheries in the North Pacific, and puts an immediate cap on expansion of bottom trawl fishing in international waters stretching from Hawaii to Alaska.

The deal was reached last week in Vancouver by the United States, Japan, Canada, China, South Korea, Russia and Taiwan after nearly five years of negotiations.

Environmentalists have long complained about the damage done to sensitive ecosystems and marine life on the ocean floor by boats that use weighted nets and other fishing gear that drag along the seabed.

Drag fishing can damage to seamounts, or undersea mountain ranges, that attract fish and are home to cold-water corals, deep-sea sponges and a wide range of other marine life, the United Nations warned in 2006 report.

"What it does is freeze the footprint of where they are fishing now," said Ben Enticknap of Oceana, one of the environmental organizations that participated in the negotiations.

The interim measure covering the Northeastern Pacific will allow scientists time to study fish stocks and to develop a long-term management plan.

"The idea is that we can develop a more sustainable fishery," Enticknap said.

An interim cap was already in place for the Northwest Pacific, and there was concern about the remaining region being left unprotected, according to a copy of the agreement provided to Reuters.

Scientists say fishing fleets have increasingly turned to the high seas, including the North Pacific, as coastal fish stocks have been depleted and technology to locate the fish has improved.

There are already agreements managing individual fish species such as tuna, but fish living around seamounts have "fallen through the cracks," said Daniel Pauly, a fisheries scientist at the University of British Columbia.

Many of the species that are caught or killed inadvertently by drag fishing on seamounts also require a long time to reproduce and replenish their stocks, said Pauly, who likened the practice to coal mining that removes mountaintops.

Pauly said that while the new protections are a good idea, it remains to be seen if the planned fisheries management organization will be given the power it needs to enforce restrictions.

The environmental groups said they remain concerned that about 5.1 million square miles of water remains unprotected between the ocean region covered by this agreement and a deal reached earlier for the South Pacific.

(Reporting Allan Dowd, Editing by Peter Galloway)

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