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Fishing Treaty Takes Effect

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Almost a decade in the making, the world's first treaty to end abuses of unregulated fishing on the high seas has taken effect as Malta signed on as the 30th nation needed to make it work.

A month after Malta's ratification, the binding United Nations treaty formally went into effect on Tuesday. Officials from the State and Commerce departments said Wednesday that its provisions will significantly boost data collection and research, resources management and nations' compliance and enforcement.

"The impact could be very great," said Dean Swanson, chief of the international fisheries division for the Commerce Department's National Marine Fisheries Service. "It's a new expression of standards in these areas that are to be applied by states mainly through their memberships in regional fishery management organizations."

The United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization, the sole entity that collects global fisheries statistics, estimates that more than two-thirds of marine fish stocks are either overexploited or at just sustainable limits. But researchers based in Canada said last month that overreporting by China to the FAO has masked dramatic declines in global fish catches for more than a decade.

Also Wednesday, the World Wildlife Fund said in a report that \$4 billion worth of fish is lost each year to illegal fishing in the western Bering Sea, contributing to the rapid collapse of the main fishery supplying the United States and Russia. The report's lead author blamed the poaching on weak laws and enforcement along with widespread organized crime.

Swanson said the global treaty is significant since "a troubling number of fish stocks worldwide are either fully exploited or overexploited." The United States has been cooperating with regional organizations since ratifying the treaty in 1996, U.S. officials said.

Perhaps most important, the treaty allows for the first time a nation's enforcement and surveillance agents -- in the United States, they would be Coast Guard officers -- to board and inspect fishing vessels from another nation, and to take action against those found violating agreements on overfishing.

That means agents with reasonable cause for action can detain a vessel in a local port until the nation whose flag the boat is flying takes responsibility.

"This is the first time that's been established as legitimate international law. That is a very big step, but it only applies to the parties to the agreement," said Lisa Speer, a fisheries conservation

expert with Natural Resources Defense Council in New York who helped draft the treaty from 1993 to 1995.

Nevertheless, she said, the treaty "if implemented quickly and fully has the potential to restore many of the fish stocks that have been depleted by decades of overfishing."

The 30 nations that signed off on the treaty will jointly collect and exchange fishery data and also are obligated to settle disputes peaceably.

The treaty grew out of concerns aired at a U.N. summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in July 1992. Many of the nations whose economies most heavily rely on fishing from the world's oceans have not yet accepted the agreement, however.

"It's one thing to get the agreement to come into force. It's another thing to get all these meaningful fishing states such as Japan, Korea and Taiwan to ratify the agreement," said David Burney, executive director of the U.S. Tuna Foundation in San Diego who also helped draft the treaty.

Burney, whose group represents the U.S. canned tuna industry, said the new treaty can be seen as a model blueprint for management and conservation: "You've got to have some regulation of the fisheries or you're going to destroy the resource."

In addition to the United States, nations that have ratified the treaty include Canada, Australia and New Zealand.