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Subsidies to `strip-mining' trawlers need to stop, report warns

CanWest News Service

Fri 17 Nov 2006

Byline: Margaret Munro

Source: CanWest News Service

High-sea trawlers said to be ``strip-mining" the world's fisheries are being financially subsidized by Japan, Russia, Spain, Australia and several other countries, says a Canadian report sure to raise eyebrows at the United Nations.

Subsidies to the bottom trawlers total \$152 million US a year, and help keep the unregulated fishery alive, says the report by the **University of British Columbia's** fisheries centre.

``If we could get rid of the subsidies, it would be huge in terms of saving the deep sea," says Rashid Sumaila, lead author of the report released Thursday.

The trawling is said to be devastating slow growing fish like orange roughy. The ships drag large nets along the bottom, a practice likened to clear-cutting and strip-mining, that destroys not just fish stocks but habitat on the sea bottom.

The UN General Assembly resumes negotiations today on banning the practice. U.S. President George W. Bush announced a month ago the U.S. will join the U.K., Australia and New Zealand in supporting a temporary moratorium on deep-sea trawling in international waters. Canadian officials oppose the ban, fearing it might lead to restrictions on trawling in Canadian waters.

While the **UBC** researchers favour a ban, they say abolishing the subsidies to the trawlers would achieve the same goal, as the vessels could no longer afford to fish.

``Eliminating government subsidies would render the fleet economically unviable," says Sumaila, who notes more than half the subsidies are for fuel.

He and his colleagues list the subsidies by country. Japan is at the top, providing subsidies of \$35 million, followed by Russia at \$30 million, South Korea at \$27 million, Spain at \$19 million, and Australia at \$10 million. The total global subsidies of \$152 million is equivalent to 15 per cent of the value of the fish the vessels catch by dragging nets across seamounts and other areas where fish congregate. The report says the operations are marginal with profits of only 10 per cent.

``There surely is a better way for governments to spend money than by increasing subsidies to a fleet that wastes fuel to maintain paltry catches of fish, from highly vulnerable stocks, while destroying their habitat in the process," report Sumaila and his co-authors, including Daniel Pauly who directs the fisheries centre.

Sumaila says the trawlers originate and fuel up in countries like Japan, South Korea, Russia, Spain, and Australia, but often fly flags of other countries while at sea. He says it'll be hard for countries to deny the **UBC** findings because the team has tracked the vessels' origin, fuel consumption and catches.

While Ottawa has refused to support the call for a UN ban, federal Fisheries Department officials say they're concerned about the trawling and are working internationally to see it stopped.

A report by an international team of scientists recently warned the world fishery is on track to collapse by 2050. Already, 29 per cent of seafood species, including Southern Bluefin tuna and Canada's once vast northern cod stocks, have collapsed.

The subsidies to the high-sea trawl fleet are just one of many financial incentives driving over-exploitation of world's fisheries that need to be curtailed, says the **UBC** team.

Story Type: Business

Note: EDS: ``Today" in copy is Friday.

Length: 524 words