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US wants net closed on fishing aid

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GENEVA — The US yesterday called for support at the World Trade Organisation (WTO) to outlaw subsidies that promote overfishing in an effort to slow the destruction of global marine stocks, three-quarters of which are already overexploited.

The US has called for WTO rules prohibiting aid such as low-cost fuel or loan guarantees for gear or vessels that allow boats to stay at sea for longer and catch fish more easily.

The Bush administration and environmental groups say such payments keep fishing enterprises in business and encourage overfishing of increasingly fragile ocean stocks.

“The WTO faces a historic opportunity to address a problem with direct and immediate consequences not only for trade but also for the marine environment,” Peter Allgeier, US ambassador to the WTO told a meeting in Geneva yesterday.

Global fishery subsidies of all types total as much as \$34bn a year, with Japan and the European Union (EU) together accounting for more than one-fifth of that amount, according to a study last year by the University of British Columbia. The subsidies kept too many people in the fishing industry, which undermined efforts to conserve fish stocks, the study said.

The WTO negotiations are part of wider efforts to get a global accord cutting farm subsidies and import duties on machinery and to simplify customs paperwork. It was the first time environmental concerns had driven trade negotiations, said Courtney Sakai, a campaign director at Washington-based Oceana, which lobbies for sustainable fishing practices.

The US spends \$276m a year on support for fuel and measures that increase a fleet’s ability to catch fish, Oceana says.

In comparison, the 27-state EU spends \$2,3bn a year on similar support, and another \$517,6m on support that reduces its fleet by de-commissioning older vessels or helping fishermen to retire. EU subsidies provide one-sixth of the total value of the EU catch.