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U.S. calls for cuts in fishing subsidies

By John Zarocostas, Tuesday, May 1, 2007

GENEVA: The United States called Tuesday for global trade talks to include a ban on billions of dollars worth of ecology-damaging subsidies linked to excess capacity of fleets, overfishing and depletion of fish stocks.

"The stakes are high for the world's oceans and for the fishing communities that depend on them," said Peter Allgeier, the U.S. ambassador to the World Trade Organization. "High subsidy levels are part of the reason the global fishing capacity is significantly greater than needed to catch what the oceans can produce sustainably," Allgeier told officials from 150 countries taking part in the WTO-sponsored talks in Doha, Qatar.

The proposal, by Washington, rallied support from many countries including Chile, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, China, Mexico, Ecuador, and Brazil.

But it also drew objections from the European Union and other countries with influential industry lobbies including Norway, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan.

The Korean delegation, for example, said that it did not accept that subsidies in general should be prohibited. Japan argued that aid for infrastructure such as fishing ports should be exempted. The 11-page proposal calls for "a broad prohibition on subsidies to the harvesting of marine wild capture fisheries." This would halt government aid ranging from construction support for fishing trawlers to equipment and supplies of subsidized fuel.

The plan also calls for exceptions to the prohibition. Aid would be permitted in cases of vessel decommissioning, unemployment relief, worker retraining and government-to-government payments for access by fishing fleets to certain exclusive economic zones, among other instances.

The proposal was welcomed by green advocacy groups which have been generally critical of the Bush administration's stance on global environmental issues.

"It's a strong proposal," said David Schorr, senior fellow with the World Wildlife Fund. "We think it provides a good framework for moving forward."

Courtney Sakai, campaign director for Oceana, an advocacy group for protecting the oceans, said the United States "made a bold move towards achieving a successful outcome" in the talks.

"The subsidies lavished on the world's fishing fleets have created a global armada that is creating havoc in our oceans," she added.

Sakai said of the estimated \$30 billion to \$34 billion in fisheries subsidies annually at least \$20 billion were harmful.

Japan was the biggest fisheries subsidizer, providing about \$5.3 billion a year, followed by the EU and China with \$3.1 billion each; India, \$2.4 billion; Russia, \$1.9 billion; Brazil, \$1.3 billion, and the United States, \$1.2 billion, according to an economic study cited by Oceana.