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U.S. Unveils Doha Plan to Slash Fishing Supports

By REUTERS

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WASHINGTON (Reuters) - The United States launched a plan on Wednesday to slash world fishing subsidies by more than 50 percent in the [World Trade Organization's](#) Doha round of trade talks.

The plan to curb nearly all government supports that encourage fishermen to harvest an unsustainable share of the world's marine life was submitted to the WTO, U.S. trade officials said.

"The WTO faces an historic opportunity to resolve a serious problem that distorts trade and damages the environment," U.S. Trade Representative Susan Schwab said in a statement.

The 14-page plan is the first comprehensive blueprint offered by the United States on commercial fishing subsidies.

Key to the U.S. plan is a ban on state supports for wild-capture fishing, which are believed to encourage overfishing. The supports to be banned would include payments for ships, fuel, and fishing equipment.

It would provide exceptions for some subsidies, including boat buybacks and boat safety, stock enhancement, or research programs, and set rules for how they will be allowed.

According to Oceana, an international environmental group, subsidies that encourage overfishing by directly supporting fishing capacity cost about \$20 billion a year worldwide, while overall fishing subsidies are up \$34 billion a year.

Overfishing the world's oceans is a troubling trend: the [United Nations](#) estimates that 52 percent of marine fish stocks are at or near the maximum sustainable output levels, and almost 20 percent are overexploited.

Some scientists warn that overfishing and habitat destruction could collapse the world's fish and seafood populations by the year 2048.

"Eliminating overfishing subsidies is the largest single action you could take to protect the ocean," said Courtney Sakai, campaign director at Oceana.

She pointed to Japan, the [European Union](#) and China as the nations that shell out the most for fishermen, some of whom bring home catches from waters off Africa or Latin America.

The U.S. plan also considers allowing exceptions for small levels of capacity-enhancing subsidies. The ban would not apply to fish farming, but would prohibit wild harvest catches associated with that industry.

The United States said its proposal, like plans from New Zealand and Brazil, was a strong one because it rested on a

broad subsidy ban that would grant some exceptions. It said plans from Europe and Japan would fall short.

If successful, the U.S. plan could reduce overall fishing subsidies by \$20 billion, according to Oceana's calculations.

There were few details on making exceptions for developing countries, which has been a hallmark of the Doha round in other areas, like agriculture.

Yet even if a U.S. proposal on fishing subsidies is palatable to other WTO members, any new rules would become reality only if a new world trade deal is concluded.

The Doha round, which also covers manufacturing and services, has been making only fitful progress.

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