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U.S. tells WTO members that fishing subsidies should be banned

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GENEVA -- Fishing subsidies should be banned to make global trade more equitable and prevent overfishing of already depleted high-sea stocks, the United States told World Trade Organization members on Tuesday.

Some 2.6 billion people around the world depend on fish for their food, and millions of livelihoods in the fishing industry are under threat if no action is taken, the American ambassador to the trade body said after presenting the U.S. proposal.

"We see obvious trade benefits from it, but also benefits in terms of protecting the marine environment and also sustainable development, since so many countries depend on fishing as an important part of their economy," Peter Allgeier told reporters in Geneva.

Environmental groups have backed the U.S. proposal, saying it provides an opportunity to save global fish stocks from collapsing.

Oceana, a Washington-based pressure group, cites a Canadian study estimating that the world's fishing industry each year receives some \$20 billion - a quarter of its revenue - in subsidies that encourage overfishing of species including swordfish, tuna and marlin, or sustain environmentally damaging practices such as dredging the sea floor.

The 27-nation European Union, which gives out hundreds of millions of euros a year to fleets in Spain and other member countries, is the biggest single subsidizer, followed by China, India, Japan and Brazil, according to Oceana, whose most recent figures were for the year 2000.

China disputes that it is one of the leading subsidizers and says the vast majority of its payments are to support research, fisheries management and the decommissioning of vessels.

According to officials at the meeting Tuesday, Korea and Taiwan opposed a blanket ban on fisheries subsidies, while Japan and the EU expressed reservations about certain aspects of the paper.

The U.S. proposal, which would prohibit all trade-distorting subsidies but make exceptions for poorer countries and research purposes, would be part of a package of agreements to be discussed under the organization's stalled Doha round of trade talks.

The proposal does not deal with fish farming, which is covered under the round's general agriculture negotiation, Allgeier said. The whole set of talks, which also aims to liberalize trade in manufactured goods and services, has been at an impasse over proposed reductions in farm subsidies and tariffs.