

Arctic fishing ban report places pressure on Canada

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A U.S. report urging a moratorium on Arctic Ocean fisheries north of Alaska is putting pressure on Canada to produce its own sustainable, long-term strategy for managing what scientists believe could become a major new resource in the polar region's warming waters.

The proposed ban on Arctic fishing by the U.S. North Pacific Fishery Management Council - at least until researchers can fully assess the impact of climate change and the retreat of sea ice on fish populations widely believed to be moving northward - was quickly hailed by environmentalists as a prudent and proactive response to the potential bonanza for northern fishing fleets.



CREDIT: Paul Darrow/Reuters
The Canadian Coast Guard ice breaker

"The environment in the Alaskan Arctic is changing, with warming trends in ocean temperatures and changes in seasonal sea ice conditions potentially favouring the development of commercial fisheries," the council concluded. But it argued that the U.S. government should "close the Arctic to commercial fishing so that unregulated fishing does not occur ... until information improves so that fishing can be conducted sustainably and with due concern to other ecosystem components."

Michael Byers, a University of British Columbia expert in polar politics, says Canada needs to at least consider similar measures to protect and foster a potentially lucrative Arctic fishery.

"What happens when - as is likely - biological activity between Canada's Arctic islands in Hudson Bay and the Beaufort Sea spikes as a result of disappearing sea ice and the consequent increase in photosynthesis?" he asks. "Serious attention does need to be directed to the issue, and certain guiding principles applied, including the precautionary principle and a principle of first access for indigenous peoples."

Byers notes that securing sustainable aboriginal access to Arctic fish resources is important "not just for equity reasons, but because privileging Inuit fishermen could also strengthen Canada's sovereignty claims" in the Far North.

The U.S. fisheries council, part of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, has sent its recommendation for a moratorium to the federal Commerce Department. Council chairman Eric Olson urged approval of the "precautionary, protective approach" to safeguarding Arctic fish stocks until new populations can be fully studied.

"We urge other Arctic countries to follow the lead of the United States," responded Bill Fox, vice-president of fisheries for the World Wildlife Fund. "Many

of the fish stocks and other elements of the marine ecosystem cross more than one country's jurisdiction, and while the U.S. move is necessary, it is not sufficient unless other Arctic nations take similar steps."

The proposed U.S. moratorium would cover a vast stretch of Arctic waters off of Alaska's north coast, including much of the Beaufort Sea east of Alaska's maritime boundary with the Yukon.

A host of recent scientific studies have predicted major migrations of sub-Arctic fish species into the increasingly ice-free polar ocean, where subsistence fishing by Inuit and other Arctic peoples has gone on for centuries but major commercial fisheries have not generally flourished.

Last year, a U.S. study examining ancient migrations of marine species raised the prospect of Pacific shellfish and other populations spreading across a warmed Arctic Ocean through Canada's Arctic archipelago to the Atlantic Ocean.

And just last week, a major study by a team of Canadian scientists predicted a significant movement of southern fish populations into northern waters to take advantage of increasing polar temperatures and melting ice cover.

"Atlantic cod on the east coast of the U.S. may shift their distribution towards the Canadian coast by more than 30 kilometres per decade," said UBC biologist William Cheung, lead author of a report published in the latest edition of the British journal Fish and Fisheries.

"Species invasion is projected to be most intense in the Arctic," the study noted.

University of Calgary political scientist Rob Huebert said the potential polar fishery is "the one issue where you're starting to see some consideration of an Arctic-only treaty" to manage the potentially lucrative - but initially vulnerable - global resource.

"It may not be a bad idea," he says, as Canada and other polar countries try to foster healthy Arctic fish populations that are bound to cross international boundaries.

Huebert warned that Canada is facing potential conflicts with other nations over Arctic fishing - such as in the Davis Strait between Greenland and Baffin Island. Struggles between provincial, territorial and federal interests over new fisheries are also bound to intensify, he added.

Huebert also emphasized that aboriginal rights to exploit nascent fisheries would be an important and "delicate" issue to be resolved among all Arctic nations.

The emerging Arctic fishery is suddenly gaining attention throughout the circumpolar world.

Last week, Norwegian foreign minister Jonas Gahr Store described Norway's Arctic strategy as his country's number one priority and vowed to pursue a sustainable path to exploiting fisheries and other resources.

"If climate change makes it possible to harvest the living resources in the Arctic in the future, we will seek to ensure that a sound management regime is established," he said. "Norway will also seek to ensure that an integrated management plan for these sea areas is implemented in, and by, all the Arctic coastal states."