

Home > Archive > Corporates & Markets > Commodities

WTO is key to avoiding collapse in fish stocks: Experts



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The global supply of fish is on the brink of collapse and without an agreement at the World Trade Organization to stop overfishing, damage to marine life may be permanent within decades, a group of scientists warns.

Government aid worth \$20 billion a year, or a quarter of the value of the global fish catch, is aggravating the problem, say scientists led by Boris Worm of Dalhousie University in Canada and Daniel Pauly of the University of British Columbia. Harmful techniques including bottom trawling, which scrapes the ocean floor, are made viable because of the handouts that subsidise fuel and improve equipment on fishing vessels.

The US is pushing for new WTO rules outlawing aid such as low-cost fuel or loan guarantees for gear that allows boats to stay at sea for longer and catch fish more easily. An estimated 90% of so-called big fish such as swordfish, tuna and marlin have already disappeared, Worm wrote in a study published in Nature magazine in 2003.

The WTO negotiations represent the best opportunity to control worldwide subsidies to the fishing sector, the scientists wrote on Thursday in a letter to WTO Director General Pascal Lamy. The majority of the world's fish populations are in jeopardy from overfishing and if current trends continue, will be beyond recovery within decades.

Global fishery subsidies of all types total as much as \$34 billion a year, with Japan and the European Union together accounting for more than a fifth of that amount, according to a study last year by the University of British Columbia. The handouts keep too many people in the fishing industry, undermining 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.

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