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U.S. panel urges ban on fishing in warming Arctic

Fri Feb 6, 2009 12:25am GMT

By Deborah Zabarenko, Environment Correspondent

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - In a pre-emptive strike against the expected effects of climate change, a U.S. advisory panel on Thursday urged a ban on commercial fishing across a wide swath of the Arctic Sea off the Alaskan coast.

The North Pacific Fishery Management Council voted to prohibit fishing in nearly 200,000 square nautical miles of Arctic waters in the so-called U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone, which stretches from 3 miles offshore to 200 miles offshore, starting at the Bering Strait and extending north and east to the U.S.-Canada border.

This area includes the Beaufort and Chukchi seas, home to polar bears and other species listed as threatened under the U.S. Endangered Species Act. It also includes vast areas of oil and gas leases.

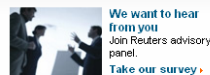
There is no industrial fishing now in the area of the potential ban, but with Arctic sea ice ebbing and sea surface temperatures rising, environmentalists, scientists and policy-makers are already seeing some fish species moving northward into the U.S. Arctic. Without a ban, the fishing fleet would presumably follow.

The council's unanimous decision includes a process for initiating commercial fishing in the future, "but only when the council has ... sufficient scientific information on a potential fish stock and knowledge of how commercial fishing might affect the Arctic ecosystem," council staff member Bill Wilson said in an e-mail from Seattle, where the panel met.

This kind of forward-thinking approach is highly unusual, said Chris Krenz of the marine conservation group Oceana.



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HEADING OFF ECOSYSTEM DAMAGE

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"This is the exact opposite," Krenz said. "(It) will help ensure that any fishing that does take place is done sustainably and without harming the health or the ecosystem or opportunities for the subsistence way of life of the people of the U.S. Arctic."

The Pew Environment Group, the Ocean Conservancy, World Wildlife Fund and Greenpeace all added their plaudits.

The Marine Conservation Alliance, an association of fishermen, processors and communities involved in fisheries off Alaska, supported the decision: "The Council's action to close these waters as a precautionary measure gives us the opportunity to conduct the scientific review necessary to develop a plan for how sustainable fisheries might be conducted in the Arctic in the future."

Another reason to prohibit fishing in this area is to learn more about the impact of global warming in the Arctic, which is little understood, Krenz said.

The Arctic is warming about twice as fast, on average, as the rest of the world. The last two years have seen dramatic decreases in the amount of sea ice that remains during the northern summer, and the extent of January sea ice is well below normal when compared to the long-term record, the U.S. National Snow and Ice Data Center reported this week.

Krenz said the council's action could serve as a model for other nations and other industries, including oil and gas exploration, contemplating moves into the Arctic.

The council's recommendation must ultimately be approved by the U.S. commerce secretary; the approval process, including a period of public comment, could take a year.