OCEANA

Towards Sustainable Fishing

This document is intended to foster discussion on key elements of a successful WTO fisheries subsidies agreement.

WTO OMC

The oceans contain a vast diversity of life and provide food, medicine, energy and recreation, but they are not as once commonly believed, inexhaustible. Global overfishing and other unsustainable fishing practices have depleted nearly all commercial fish populations and degraded the ecosystems that support them.

Despite the precarious state of the oceans, many governments continue to provide significant subsidies to their fishing sectors to fish longer, harder, and farther away. Fisheries subsidies amount to an estimated $30 to $34 billion annually, of which $20 billion go directly toward supporting fishing capacity, such as boats, fuel, equipment, and other operating costs[1]. The global fishing fleet is almost 250 percent larger than is needed to catch what the ocean can sustainably produce[2]. Subsidies can lead to greater fishing capacity, create economic incentive for overfishing, make fishing enterprises more profitable despite declining fishery resources, and promote other destructive fishing practices such as high seas bottom trawling and illegal, unregulated, and unreported (IUU) fishing.

The World Trade Organization has an historic opportunity to help stop and reverse the devastating effects of overfishing by eliminating harmful subsidies and developing rules to address the impacts of subsidies on global fisheries and help ensure that their application is sustainable.

One of the great challenges facing the WTO members in the fisheries subsidies negotiations is ensuring that subsidies in developing countries do not result in further depletion of resources and that currently underexploited resources do not become depleted in the future.

Subsidies in developing countries should be limited to programs for **subsistence** fishing and **sustainable** fishing. To ensure that subsistence fishing does not lead to overexploitation of resources, it should be strictly defined to include only nearshore fishing that uses specific low capacity fishing gears and results in de minimis commercial exploitation.

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In an effort to stimulate discussion on subsidies and sustainability, Oceana offers the following 5 steps toward sustainable fishing:

The WTO can play a critical role in ensuring the future of the oceans. The key question is whether WTO intervention will be ambitious enough to forestall the projected collapse of the world's wild fish populations.

1. Subsidies should only be provided to **harvest healthy resources**. A healthy resource is a fish population that is at a sustainable fish population size[1] and that is being fished at a sustainable rate[2].

2. Subsidies should only be provided to harvest from fisheries with **fishing capacity well below the capacity needed** to fully sustainably exploit the healthy resource[3], and where the subsidy does not increase fishing capacity to a point where it is close to approaching the capacity needed to fully sustainably exploit the healthy resource.

3. Subsidies should only be provided to support harvesting activities within the member country's **own exclusive economic zone** (EEZ).

4. Subsidies should only be provided by countries that have a **fishery management system** that includes total allowable catches for targeted species and significant bycatch species, as well as fisheries monitoring, control, surveillance, and law enforcement measures. In addition, the management system must be sufficiently robust to assess fish population sizes, fishing rates, existing capacity levels, capacity levels that would fully sustainably exploit the healthy resource, and where the subsidized vessels are fishing.

5. Subsidies to **replace foreign capacity** with domestic capacity must meet similar conditions: the resource is healthy, the subsidies only support harvesting activities within the country's own EEZ, domestic capacity is well below the capacity needed to fully sustainably exploit the healthy resource and the resulting total capacity is not close to approaching the capacity needed to fully sustainably exploit the healthy resource.

[1] *Pauly, D. and R. Sumaila. 2006. Catching more bait: A bottom-up re-estimation of global fisheries subsidies. University of British Columbia, Fisheries Centre Research Report. Vol. 14, No. 6 2nd Version*

[2] *Porter, G. 1998. Estimating Overcapacity in the Global Fishing Fleet. WWF. Washington, D.C.*

[3] *A "sustainable fish population size" is a size between the biomass consistent with catching the maximum sustainable yield year after year and the carrying capacity, such that the fish population is large enough to support its role in the ecosystem and is large enough to be robust against risks from fishing, including inadvertent overfishing due to the imperfect knowledge and imperfect control of fishing impacts inherent in fishery management.*

[4] *A "sustainable rate" of fishing is a rate of fishing no higher than the rate consistent with maintaining a fish population at a sustainable fish population size year after year.*

[5] *To "fully sustainably exploit" a healthy resource means to catch fish from the resource at a rate consistent with maintaining the fish population at a sustainable fish population size year after year.*

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