

WTO urges quick ban on harmful fisheries subsidies

October 8 2019, by Agnès Pedrero



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The World Trade Organization on Tuesday called for countries to speed

up talks aimed at hammering out an agreement on banning harmful fisheries subsidies.

"It is clear today that the harm done by many fisheries subsidies cannot continue," WTO chief Roberto Azevedo told a conference in Geneva.

"No one questions the link between government subsidies and the depletion of global [fish stocks](#)," he said, stressing the need for "a range of urgent actions... if there is to be anything left for the future."

The United Nations has said that countries should by 2020 ban all fisheries subsidies that "contribute to illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing, and refrain from introducing new such subsidies".

The UN estimates that a third of the world's fish stocks were harvested at unsustainable levels in 2015, compared to just 10 percent in 1974.

But more than two decades of talks at the WTO on the issue of eliminating harmful fisheries subsidies have been largely unproductive.

Looming deadline

"It is time to finish," Azevedo said, pointing out that "these negotiations have been going on already for a very long time."

"We have less than three months to meet the end-of-year deadline," he said.



Britain's Sir David Attenborough said "all is not lost"

"If we do not meet this deadline, our [marine resources](#) will not wait, they will continue to decline and this should be of pressing concern to all of us."

With his appeal, Azevedo joined a call by the World Economic Forum's so-called Friends of Ocean Action coalition, made up of some 50 politicians, business leaders and environmentalists, for countries to step up efforts to conclude the talks.

But negotiations appear as deadlocked as ever, with countries even unable to agree on nominating a new chair of the talks after Mexican Roberto Zapata Barradas left in August.

Today, countries are estimated to spend around \$22 billion (20 billion euros) on such subsidies, with devastating effect.

"Government subsidies are keeping boats fishing even where there are too few fish left for fishing to be profitable," veteran conservationist David Attenborough said in a video message played at the WTO conference.

"These subsidies... fund the ongoing destruction of the natural world on which we all depend," he said, but added "all is not lost."

"We can turn this around right now... It is time to put an end to subsidies that harm our oceans."



Countries are estimated to spend around \$22 billion on fisheries subsidies

Most of the harmful fisheries subsidies today come from China, the European Union, South Korea and Japan, according to Remi Parmentier, an advisor to the Friends of Ocean Action.

He said he hoped WTO's call would "crack the whip" on negotiators.

Alice Tipping, of the International Institute for Sustainable Development think-tank, also stressed the urgency of the situation and the need to push the talks to the "political level".

Speeding things up is especially important given that the next WTO ministerial meeting, scheduled to be held in Kazakhstan next June, will likely be heavily focused on other topics: global trade wars and far-reaching WTO reform.

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