10-30-2014

European Union Bans Fish Imports from Belize

Louisa Reynolds

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiCen by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.
European Union Bans Fish Imports from Belize

by Louisa Reynolds

Category/Department: Belize

Published: 2014-10-30

In November 2013, the European Union (EU) announced it would ban fish imports from Belize, Guinea, and Cambodia, because of concerns that they had failed to crack down on piracy and illegal fishing. South Korea, Ghana, and Curaçao were also warned that they could face similar sanctions if they failed to tackle illegal fishing practices and were given a six-month "trial period" to show progress on the issue. For now, these formal warnings or "yellow cards" will not affect trade with those countries.

This is the first time that imports have been banned as a result of the widespread global trade in landing fishing for which vessels do not have the correct fishing permits. As a result of this ban, EU vessels will not be allowed to fish in the waters of the three countries that have been sanctioned.

After being ratified by the European Commission, the sanctions came into force at the beginning of 2014.

"The decision is consistent with the EU's international commitment to ensuring the sustainable exploitation of fisheries resources at home and abroad. The EU's approach toward combatting illegal fishing reflects the fact that IUU [illegal, unreported, and unregulated] fishing is a global criminal activity, which is harmful not only to EU fishermen and markets but also to local communities in developing countries," reads a press statement issued by the European Commission in November 2013.

European Commissioner for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries Maria Damanaki said, "These decisions show our steadfast commitment to tackling illegal fishing. The EU market is negatively affected as are local and EU fishermen. We continue to put pressure on the countries that are fuelling the supply chain of illegal fishing be it as a coastal state, flag state, or flag of convenience. West Africa was identified as a major source of illegal fishing and my intention is now to take the same thorough approach in the Pacific."

Most environmental nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) welcomed the move. Tony Long, director of the Ending Illegal Fishing Project at the Pew Charitable Trusts, told The Guardian newspaper, "The EU is a huge market for seafood, so it is critical that the council should act to ensure that only legally caught fish are reaching consumers. While the three countries cited do not represent the whole picture, we are pleased that the European Commission is continuing to investigate other countries known for their lax enforcement of illegal fishing."

The EU currently imports around 65% of the seafood it consumes. Its imports from Belize, Guinea, and Cambodia amount to less than US$12.8 million, according to official statistics; South Korea, Ghana, and Curaçao amount to more than US$256.5 million a year.

"[The ban] sends an unequivocal message to pirate fishing operators that the EU will leverage its unique legislation to prevent the willful and illegal actions that are damaging marine environments, depleting fish stocks, undermining legitimate operators, and destroying the livelihoods of many
poor coastal communities,” Steve Trent, executive director of the Environmental Justice Foundation, told The Guardian.

Is the ban unfair?

However, Britt Groosman, the European program director for the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF), and Janet Gibson, the Belize program director for the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), say the ban is unfair because it fails to take into account that "a coalition of fishermen, fishery managers, marine scientists, and NGOs are crafting sustainable fishing regulations that simultaneously protect biodiversity and Belize’s vital coastal fishing industry."

Groosman and Gibson point out that the fishing industry is one of Belize’s key sources of employment and that since 2009 the Belizian government, the EDF, the WCS, and other organizations have worked to establish management techniques that establish adequate catch limits and demarcate restricted areas.

The measures implemented include creating a national network of Territorial User Rights for Fishing (TURFs), which allow groups of fishers to fish in certain areas. TURFs also include replenishment zones, where fishing is forbidden to allow the regeneration of fish stocks. "This is a win-win system where fishermen have a direct stake in the health of the area where they fish and by extension have more incentive to help protect the replenishment zone. As these fisheries recover, fishers can catch more fish and become vocal stewards of the ecosystem," write Groosman and Gibson.

The first TURFs were created in 2011 in Port Honduras, with support from the Toledo Institute for Development and Environment (TIDE) and Glover’s Reef, two highly biodiverse areas that are prone to overfishing.

Groosman and Gibson say the results in the past two years have been highly encouraging as illegal fishing is in sharp decline, fewer juvenile fish are being caught, habitats are being protected, and fishers are respecting the new rules.

As the government’s oversight and enforcement capacity remains weak, enlisting fishers to the cause and making them realize the importance of protecting fishing resources in order to guarantee the future of one of the country’s main sources of employment has been crucially important. In Port Honduras and Glover’s Reef, fishers have formed community-based committees to decide who is eligible to fish under the new TURFs system and oversee compliance with the rules by cooperating with government rangers. The program has been so successful that it will be expanded during the next two years to include 45% of Belize’s insular waters and it will potentially go nationwide by 2020. Other countries, including a number of major fishing powers, such as Indonesia, Philippines, Brazil, and Honduras, are also considering a national catch system based on the Belizean model.

"International policy-making bodies must work to amend or repeal regulations that inadvertently exacerbate the very problem they were designed to correct. At the same time, countries around the world must work on all fronts to build more sustainable, equitable, and transparent fishing industries. Belize’s fisheries reform process demonstrates the challenges and opportunities presented by each on the path to sustainability," say Groosman and Gibson.