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Fisheries Secretary Says U.S. Tuna Boycott Violates G.a.t.t.

by Steven Ranieri

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On Feb. 5, Fisheries Minister Maria de los Angeles Moreno said that despite suspension of the US boycott on Mexican tuna up to May 31, Mexican exports to the US have dropped by 70% due to the decision of three packing companies to maintain the boycott. In statements to reporters on Feb. 13, the minister said that by boycotting Mexican tuna under the guise of ecological concerns, US companies are violating the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT). The minister said that while a US government ruling to embargo Mexican yellowfin tuna is still pending on appeal before the California Supreme Court, private companies are refusing to import the fish "as a result of pressures from ecological groups." Robert Fitzgerald, representing the San Francisco-based Defenders of Wildlife Foundation, said the sanctions were being imposed because of "inhumane methods." According to Fitzgerald, "Almost all of the 50-odd Mexican tuna vessels use a purse-seine net system, which unfortunately snares and kills thousands of dolphins annually." Moreno Uriegas said Mexican tuna operations inadvertently catch 25% more dolphins than US counterparts. She emphasized, however, that the Mexicans employ extreme caution to protect the sea mammals. The minister said, "The dolphin is not an endangered species and, according to recent studies, the number of dolphins in the world is stable. There have been no indications of a drop in their population...No one in Mexico wants to hurt dolphins. In fact, Mexico has had very strong laws to protect all sea mammals since 1972." According to Fisheries Secretariat statistics, between 1986 and 1990 the inadvertent capture of dolphins has declined by 70% due to training and technology programs instituted by the government. A new program will be implemented in the coming months in which 100% of Mexican tuna fishing fleets will carry observers to monitor the capture of dolphins. At present, between 35 and 40% of the fleets carry observers, who are representatives of either the Mexican Fishing Institute or the International Tropical Tuna Commission (CIAT). Due to the embargo, Mexican tuna exports fell from \$11 million in 1989 to only \$1 million in 1990. A US embargo on Mexican shrimp (over turtle deaths) is pending. Mexico exports about \$300 million worth of shrimp to the US every year, representing 80 to 90% of total shrimp exports. According to US government data, every year about 100,000 dolphins are killed by tuna fishing in the western Pacific ocean. US fishing fleets inadvertently trap an average of 2.5 dolphins per catch, while other countries vary between six and eight. (Sources: Notimex, 02/05/91, 02/14/91; El Nacional, La Jornada, 02/14/91; The Mexico City News, 02/14/91, 02/18/91; El Financiero, 02/18/91)

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