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## **U.S. Congress Votes to End Ban on Tuna Imports from Mexico, Other Nations**

by LADB Staff

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In late July, the US Senate and the House of Representatives approved legislation to end a US ban on imports of tuna from Mexico and five other countries. The end of the ban will become final once the legislation is signed by US President Bill Clinton.

The Senate legislation was approved by a vote of 99-0, after proponents reached a compromise with Sens. Barbara Boxer (D-CA) and Joseph Biden (D-DE). Boxer and Biden had opposed previous efforts to lift the ban on tuna imports from Mexico, Venezuela, Costa Rica, Vanatu, Panama, and Colombia because of concerns that fishing methods used by these countries were resulting in too many dolphin deaths. Last year, the proposed legislation never reached the Senate floor because of the efforts of Boxer and Biden, who convinced a number of senators to oppose the move (see SourceMex, 10/09/96).

### ***Legislation retains "dolphin safe" label***

Under the compromise reached this year, the Senate has agreed to continue the practice of labeling cans of tuna as "dolphin safe," which indicates that the methods used to catch the tuna did not result in a high incidence of dolphin deaths. Furthermore, the bill directs the Secretary of Commerce to make a preliminary determination in March 1999 on whether new net-fishing methods, which have greatly improved since the embargo was imposed in 1990, continue to protect the mammals enough to warrant the label. "In the end what we are going to do is keep the label the way it is," Sen. Boxer said. "I think it is a victory for American consumers."

In essence, the bill would implement the 1995 Panama declaration signed by the US, Mexico, and 11 other nations, which limits total annual dolphin kills through net fishing to 5,000. The US House of Representatives, which had passed a more lenient bill in May of this year, immediately voted to adopt the Senate measure to avoid the need to form a conference committee to harmonize two separate bills. The House bill approved in May was nearly identical to a measure approved by that same legislative body in 1996 (see SourceMex, 08/14/96 and 06/04/97).

Meanwhile, President Clinton is expected to sign the legislation before the end of August. The US administration had argued that a repeal of the embargo would provide an incentive for Mexico and the five other countries to continue abiding by safe fishing methods. The legislation also received support from several prominent environmental organizations, including Greenpeace, the World Wildlife Fund, the Center for Marine Conservation, and the Environmental Defense Fund. "This is a victory for dolphins, for the marine ecosystem, and for consumers," said Roger McManus, president of the Center for Marine Conservation.

### *Mixed reaction in Mexico*

On the other hand, the measure to lift the embargo received a mixed reaction in Mexico. Carlos Camacho Gaos, SEMARNAP's deputy secretary for fisheries, said the Mexican government was "satisfied" with the outcome of the US vote, since this provides a greater sense of certainty for the Mexican fishing industry. "For several years we have fought not only to defend the interests of the Mexican fishing industry, but we also sought to protect the environment," said Camacho. However, Environment Secretary Julia Carabias Lillo expressed concern that US legislators decided to retain the "dolphin-safe" label. "We are not pleased because there will be no immediate changes to a labeling system we consider unnecessary and unjust," Carabias told reporters.

Despite the end of the embargo, said Carabias, the Mexican fishing industry may not gain immediate access to the US market because several other procedural legislative changes are pending in the US. According the Camara Nacional de la Industria Pesquera (CANAINPES), the Mexican tuna industry will begin sales to the US market in February 1998.

Alfonso Rosinol, director of the tuna sector for CANAINPES, said sales will be targeted initially at the Mexican-American communities in the US, particularly in major cities in California, Arizona, New York, Illinois, and Texas. He said the tuna will be sold through a US distributor under the Herdez, Calmex, Dolores, and Tuny brands. (Sources: The Journal of Commerce, 07/29/97; Reuter, Associated Press, 07/30/97; Notimex, La Jornada, Novedades, The News, The Washington Post, 07/31/97; Excelsior, 07/28/97, 07/31/97, 08/01/97; El Universal, 07/31/97, 08/01/97; El Nacional, Siglo 21, 08/01/97; El Economista, 07/31/97, 08/01/97, 08/06/97)

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