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Seafood Chamber Sets Ambitious Production Target of 5 Million Tons by 2010

by LADB Staff

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Mexico's seafood-producers chamber has set an ambitious goal to boost production to almost five times the current level. At its annual conference in late April, the Camara Nacional de la Industria Pesquera (CANAINPES) targeted annual production at 5 million metric tons by 2010, compared with annual output of 1.6 million MT in recent years. CANAINPES president Alfredo Rosinol Literas said the Mexican fisheries industry intends to boost production primarily through an expansion of shrimp and fish farms.

President Ernesto Zedillo has pledged US\$57 million to promote Mexican aquaculture during the next five years. This is almost 10 times more than the budget for such purposes in 1995-1998, Rosinol told reporters. Fish farms produce only 175,000 MT of Mexico's total fisheries production, which is far short of the industry's potential capability of 7 million MT, Rosinol said. Rosinol said very little of the projected increase in fish production in the next 10 years will come from an expanded catch because this would place at risk the already fragile populations of shrimp, tuna, squid, sardines, and other fish. "We will not increase the offshore catch significantly, since this would risk the sustainability of our fisheries," he said.

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the environmental organization Greenpeace said more than 70% of the world's fisheries are "fully to over-exploited, depleted, or in a state of collapse." The global fish catch could drop to 70 million MT in coming years, compared with 85 million MT in the mid-1990's, the FAO and Greenpeace said.

Mexico to export 10% of annual tuna production to US

But Rosinol projected some increase in Mexico's tuna catch in coming years because of the end of a US embargo. In an agreement reached in May 1998, the US pledged to ease restrictions on tuna imports from Mexico and other countries in exchange for their pledge to take steps to reduce the incidental deaths of dolphins and other marine mammals (see SourceMex, 1998-05-27). The agreement went into effect in April 1999. The elimination of the embargo will allow Mexico to export about 15,000 MT of tuna to the US market annually. This is slightly more than 10% of Mexico's total annual tuna production of about 130,000 MT.

The Zedillo administration said the US embargo on Mexican tuna resulted in the loss of 30,000 direct and indirect jobs and about US\$200 million in income during the nine-year period. "This [action] will open markets and end an era that was very intense, very difficult, very painful, and very expensive for our country," said Environment Secretary Julia Carabias.

Chamber concerned about possible restrictions on shrimp

Rosinol raised concerns that Mexico's shrimping industry could suffer the same fate as the tuna sector if forced to comply with "overly strict" environmental norms. Because of these

concerns, CANAINPES has created a lobbying and education arm called Fundamar to provide "accurate" information to the fishing industry regarding concerns raised by environmental groups. "[Fundamar] will demonstrate that Mexico makes every effort to protect all species of flora and fauna associated with the fisheries industry," Rosinol said.

The shrimping industry, whose growth relies primarily on fish farms, is facing other environmental problems. In an advisory issued in late April, Greenpeace urged Mexico to take steps to stop the introduction of the white-spot virus to shrimping farms in Mexico. The virus, which has been identified in the waters of the Pacific Ocean, has already caused significant deaths of young shrimp at fish farms in Guatemala, Nicaragua, Honduras, Ecuador, and Panama. Juan Carlos Cantu, director of Greenpeace's biodiversity program, said his organization has urged the Mexican government to suspend all imports of shrimp larvae from Central America and Asia until further notice. He said the restrictions could save the shrimping industry, even though output will decline temporarily. Shrimp accounts for 70% of all the export revenues obtained by the fishing industry.

Mexico's shrimp is marketed primarily through the state-owned seafood packaging and distribution company Ocean Garden, whose operations are located primarily in California. The government attempted to privatize the company in 1994, but the bids offered were too low (see SourceMex, 1994-06-01). In mid-1998, the Zedillo administration decided to reconsider privatization, leaving the process in the hands of the government's foreign-trade bank (Banco Nacional de Comercio Exterior, Bancomext).

At that time, Bancomext director Enrique Vilatela announced that the privatization would be initiated sometime in 1999 (see SourceMex, 1998-06-10). Vilatela said an announcement on the fate of Ocean Garden will be made by July. [Sources: Greenpeace Report: Challenging the Global Grab for Declining Fish Stocks, 05/98; Spanish news service EFE, 04/26/99; Reuters, 04/30/99; Novedades, 05/03/99; El Economista, 04/26/99, 04/27/99, 05/12/99; Excelsior, Novedades, El Universal, 05/12/99]

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