

3-10-2010

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## Recommended Citation

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## **U.S. Imposes Embargo On Some Imports Of Mexican Shrimp**

*by LADB Staff*

*Category/Department: Mexico*

*Published: 2010-03-10*

The US government has announced an embargo on imports of some Mexican shrimp because of concerns that the industry's fishing practices are endangering sea turtles. The US move, which would only affect shrimp caught in the ocean, has angered the Mexican fishing industry, which claims that its practices are environmentally sound and are not harming turtles or any other endangered sea creatures. The largest industry group, the Camara Nacional de las Industrias Pesquera y Acuicola (CANAINPESCA), warns that the restrictions could threaten hundreds of jobs, particularly in Sinaloa state, where most shrimping fleets are located. The Mexican government, which has kept a low profile in this dispute, helped avert an immediate disaster for the fishing industry by entering into an agreement with the US government that delays the effective date of the embargo until April 20, after the shrimping season has ended.

This is the second dispute between the two North American neighbors involving exports of Mexican seafood to the US. The two countries have been embroiled in a prolonged dispute regarding US restrictions on imports of Mexican tuna, with fishing practices and equipment also the subject of controversy (SourceMex, September 30, 1992, April 26, 2000 and February 10, 2010). Government downplays US action In a prepared statement, the national fisheries commission (Comision Nacional de Acuicultura y Pesca, CONAPESCA) and the environmental-protection agency (Procuraduria Federal de Proteccion al Medio Ambiente, PROFEPA) said the US State Department had published the new restrictions on March 1, in compliance with a US law prohibiting importation of shrimp from countries that have not taken steps comparable to those in the US to protect sea turtles during shrimping operations. Mexican officials also tried to downplay the US action, refusing to call it an embargo. "This is not an embargo, just a precautionary action," said CONAPESCA spokesperson Cornelio Montano. The Mexican government has worked behind the scenes with US authorities to keep the shrimp dispute from having an immediate negative impact on the Mexican industry.

CONAPESCA and PROFEPA negotiated a delay in the effective date of the US restrictions to April 20, after the conclusion of the shrimping season. "This is a time when our own restrictions on shrimp fishing are in place in most of the country," the two agencies said in a joint statement. "Therefore, the embargo will have a very minor impact on our exports." PROFEPA and CONAPESCA, a division of the Secretaria de Agricultura, Ganaderia, Desarrollo Rural, Pesca y Alimentacion (SAGARPA), also worked with the US government to ensure that any restrictions would exempt imports of shrimp caught on rivers or raised in farms. The delay also buys time for the Mexican government to work with the shrimping industry to correct some of the problems that have been prevalent in Mexico's shrimping fleets. The Mexican government was anticipating the US action weeks before the decision was announced. In mid-February, Tomas Camarena Luhr, in charge of the PROFEPA division that monitors compliance with international marine-protection treaties, warned that Mexico

was in danger of losing certification to export shrimp to the US because of "bad practices" by some fishing fleets.

Inspectors from the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) observed these bad practices. "US scientists documented several cases where shrimp vessels did not close the turtle excluder devices," said Camarena. PROFEPA has also been monitoring the practices of the shrimping fleets. "In January alone, PROFEPA caught four shrimping boats, three of which were based out of Mazatlan, with their turtle-excluder devices closed," said Sinaloa-based Noroeste.com. There were also problems in Baja California Sur. "The problems detected by US inspectors were in vessels that fish in the Sea of Cortes," said the daily newspaper Sudcaliforniano, based in La Paz, Baja California Sur. But PROFEPA officials are confident that they can work with the Mexican shrimping industry to correct the problems, so that the US restrictions can be lifted by October, the start of the new shrimping season. Officials said the US should take into consideration other extensive steps that Mexico has taken to protect sea turtles. "Mexico has become a sanctuary for turtles in the past decades," said the environmental-protection agency. "Since 1990, we have a total ban on [the sale] of any item produced from our seven species of turtles."

Fishing industry concerned, angry While the government appears to take an accommodating position regarding the US decision, the same is not true for the fishing industry, business organizations, and even some environmental-advocacy groups. Critics expressed concern and anger at the US restrictions and at what they viewed as a timid response by President Felipe Calderon's administration. Industry sources urged the administration to speak more forcefully on behalf of the Mexican shrimping industry. "I had thought that [the government] would come to our defense rather than give up," said Humberto Becerra Bautista, CANAINPESCA president in Sinaloa. Becerra accused US environmental organizations of pressuring the US government to impose the restrictions on the Mexican shrimping fleets. "They are pushing for the disappearance of all the fisheries in the Gulf of California," he said. Others warned about the negative impact on the Mexican shrimping industry, which provides direct and indirect employment for thousands of Mexicans in 11 states.

Eduardo Davalos Zamora, president of the chapter of the Consejo Coordinador Empresarial (CEE) in southern Sinaloa state, said the US restrictions could be especially harmful for the Port of Mazatlan, where a majority of the country's 660 shrimping boats are based. In 2009, Mexico exported almost 40,000 tons of shrimp to the US, resulting in revenues of more than US\$258 million. Some industry sources downplayed the potential effect of the US restrictions. Manuel Montes Diaz, president of the Consejo Mexicano para la Promocion de los Productos Pesqueros y Acuicolas (COMEPESCA), disputed the US government's findings, saying that Mexico's fishing practices are sustainable and responsible. But he also suggested that the loss of the US market would have minimal impact on the Mexican shrimp industry because demand for shrimp is increasing in Mexico, especially during the Lenten season.

Others questioned Montes Diaz's suggestions, wondering whether there would be sufficient domestic demand to compensate for the loss of the export market. "[This situation] would harm the domestic market because of a potential oversupply of the crustacean, which would cause prices to collapse," said Armando Castro Real, president of the Federacion de Cooperativas Pesqueras

del Estado de Sinaloa. Sen. Jorge Andres Ocejo, who chairs the economic-development committee (Comision de Fomento Economico) in the upper house, challenged the US to present adequate proof that Mexican fishing practices were hurting sea turtles. "What we have here is more of a commercial decision," said Ocejo, a member of the governing Partido Accion Nacional (PAN). "In our trade agreements...we have said that we don't want nontariff barriers, and yet we have one here."

Surprisingly, the international environmental organization Greenpeace made the same argument as Sen. Ocejo while also recognizing that Mexico's shrimping practices are dangerous to sea turtles. Alejandro Olvera Bonilla, director of the Greenpeace division that deals with oceans and coastal regions, said the US should not pass judgment on Mexico while many of its own fishing practices harm other sea creatures. He suggested that the US decision to impose restrictions on Mexican shrimp was motivated more by commercial considerations than environmental concerns. Olvera acknowledged that there are problems with the practices of the Mexican shrimping fleets but he blamed the bad policies of CONAPESCA rather than the shrimpers. Greenpeace has consistently criticized Mexican fishing policies. In mid-February, at the start of the Lenten season, when demand for seafood rises significantly, the organization issued a report criticizing the government for failing to curb illegal fishing.

The report said roughly 40% of the 10 top species of fish and crustaceans consumed in Mexico are caught illegally. Because of this, species like bass, red snapper, grouper, shrimp, and tuna are in danger because of overexploitation. "We are not against fishing or the consumption of fish," said Olvera. "But we have to give the oceans some breathing room and prohibit predatory activities." "The purpose of our report is to bring this issue to the attention of CONAPESCA...which has allowed the continuation of unsustainable capture practices," added the Greenpeace official.

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