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Government Announces Plan to Save Endangered Porpoise in Gulf of Baja California

by Carlos Navarro

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With a lot of fanfare, the Secretaría de Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales (SEMARNAT) announced a campaign at the end of February to save the vaquita, a species of porpoise that has come to the brink of extinction because of the extensive use of gillnets to capture shrimp in the northern Gulf of California. The gillnets are also used for the illegal catch of a giant fish called the totoaba. The fish's swim bladder is in high demand in China, where the dried fish organ is used to prepare soup. Some consumers also believe the swim bladder has medicinal properties. The incentive to catch totoaba is very high in Baja California, as the fish's swim bladder can fetch as much as US\$10,000 per kg in Baja California. The gillnets used by fishers in Baja California often capture vaquitas, resulting in several deaths of the endangered sea mammals.

Under SEMARNAT's plan, the government would impose a two-year moratorium on the use of gillnets, allowing researchers to develop vaquita-safe nets. The SEMARNAT measures also include an expansion of the zone where gillnets would be prohibited, a plan to compensate the owners of shrimping fleets for loss income resulting from the ban on gillnets, and increased law-enforcement vigilance in the vaquita habitat. Authorities would make use of speedboats, drones, and community patrols to enforce the ban.

Greenpeace México, Pronatura, and other environmental organizations lauded the decision as a positive step to save the tiny porpoise, whose numbers have declined significantly in recent years. In the last census, scientists had counted fewer than 100 vaquitas in the northern Gulf of California, compared with about 200 in 2012.

Plan delayed

Two weeks after unveiling the protection measures, SEMARNAT announced that the plan would be delayed by another month to April 1 to allow authorities to collect more complete information on the fishing communities that would be affected by the ban on gillnets. President Enrique Peña Nieto's administration had planned to distribute about 1 billion pesos (US\$67 million) to affected communities, primarily people who make a living from catching shrimp. At the last minute, administration sources said they did not have a complete list of people who would receive the aid, so the ban was delayed by a month.

"This task of validating the list has taken us longer than we anticipated," said deputy environment secretary Rafael Pacchiano Alamán. "This is an investment that we know we must make to guarantee the transparency and success of the program."

Juan Manuel López Arroyo, an official with the Secretaría de Desarrollo Social (SEDESOL), explained that the delay was the result in part of the need by authorities to cross-check the names of all the potential beneficiaries with the registry of the fishing commission (Comisión Nacional de Acuacultura y Pesca, CONAPESCA).

SEMARNAT acknowledges that the measures to protect the vaquita could hurt the fishing community. "It's a big dilemma," said Environment Secretary Juan José Guerra. "But without doubt, the objective is to preserve it. We are looking for what kind of stimulus, what kind of support we can give to compensate."

Delay concerns environmental groups

The one-month delay caused major concerns among environmental organizations. "Until now, the protection measures are simply promises, and recent developments are evidence that safeguards must be implemented as soon as possible," said Sivia Díaz, director of Greenpeace México's Oceans Campaign and head of the organization's campaign to save the vaquitas.

"This delay is unacceptable, and we cannot push back implementation of these measures any longer," said Díaz, who noted that the International Committee for the Recovery of the Vaquita (CIRVA) had been pushing for urgent protections for the endangered sea mammal since September 2014 at the start of the shrimping season.

Díaz said the use of gillnets has caused vaquitas to decline by a rate of 18.5% per year or the equivalent of three of these sea mammals every two months. The last census indicated that there were 97 vaquitas in the northern California habitat as of mid-2014, compared with about 200 in 2012. "The delay in applying the measures could mean that the number is now even smaller than 97," said the Greenpeace official.

While the shrimp fleets would be affected directly, the problem is exacerbated by the ongoing illegal catch of the totoaba. "Just last week, authorities seized 86 [totoaba] swim bladders along the road from Santa Clara to San Luís Río Colorado," Diaz wrote in the Greenpeace México blog on March 19. This cargo had a value of about 3 million pesos (US\$200,000)."

CIRVA is also sounding the alarm on the potential extinction of the vaquitas. The committee has advocated for the government to shut down on the illegal fishing of totoaba and to implement the restrictions on the area's shrimping fleet. "It's definitely the last call for this species," Barbara Taylor, a marine mammal expert who works with CIRVA said at the start of the shrimping season in September 2014.

"We're encouraging them to reinvent the northern gulf," said Taylor, who is also on the staff of the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). "I don't trivialize how difficult it will be. These guys making millions of dollars trafficking in endangered species are not going to go quietly."

The shrimping community, meanwhile, is worried that the proposed two-year ban on gillnets could eliminate their livelihood. "[Government officials] deal with conservation, but they do not deal with how the communities will remain communities," Carlos Alberto Tirado, the leader of one of the fishing federations in the small town of El Golfo de Santa Clara, told The New York Times. "They would become ghost towns."

Others noted that the ban on gillnets does not mean that shrimping activities will be suspended entirely. "There is much confusion regarding the restrictions," said Ramses Rodríguez Ramírez, who heads the vaquita-conservation efforts for the environmental organization Pronatura. Rodríguez Ramírez said any of the fishing fleets that adapt their nets to protect the vaquitas will be able to fish

normally. [Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on March 25, 2015, reported at 15.00 pesos per US\$1.00.]

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