



Is 2021 the year the world finally eliminates fisheries subsidies?

Governments around the world have been subsidising fishing fleets for decades and for the past twenty years, talks have been going on to have them halted.

New Zealand is at the forefront of the fight against subsidies, understanding that the use of them to support uneconomic fishing practises leads directly to overfishing the ocean's resources through illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing.

However, like most things in the fishing space, it is complicated.

It is believed that governments around the world prop up countries' fishing fleets by around \$48 billion each year. New Zealand, once a recipient of fishing subsidies itself, had them eliminated virtually overnight in 1986, two years after New Zealand's agriculture industry also had the subsidisation rug pulled unceremoniously from beneath them. Those who decided to exit the fishing industry were compensated when the Quota Management System (QMS) introduced Individual Transferable Quotas (ITQs).

The current talks on elimination of subsidies at the World Trade Organisation (WTO) appear to hold some hope of resolution.

The sticking point is achieving a balance between eliminating subsidies to IUU fishing that contribute to depletion of global fish stocks but allowing special and differential treatment for "developing" and "least-developed countries" that rely on small and artisanal fishing to survive.

During an all-day meeting of 104 Ministers and Heads of Delegations in July, the Director-General

of the WTO Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala said; “In 20 years of negotiations, this is the closest we have ever come towards reaching an outcome — a high-quality outcome that would contribute to building a sustainable blue economy.”

She is right to be optimistic, but there are still many hurdles to overcome.

Among the thorniest issues to resolve has been how to extend special and differential treatment to developing and least developed country WTO members while preserving the overall objective of enhanced sustainability of the oceans. Ministers said that the livelihoods and food security of poor and vulnerable artisanal fishers in developing and least developed countries were of great importance.

One obstacle is the definition of a “developing country” because there is no official definition, unlike the accepted definition of a “least developed country”. For example, Singapore still calls themselves a developing country.

China also seeks the status of a developing country for their fishing industry as it enables them to access special and differential treatment especially for their domestic production and those fisheries in Hong Kong and Macau. However, their long game is for their distant-water fleet to maintain the level of subsidies that they currently provide. Having said that, China is negotiating in good faith to demonstrate its credentials as a WTO member.

India and Russia also have issues.

India, true to its protectionist roots, is seeking a 25-year exemption from the subsidy prohibitions, however, is gaining no traction, and Russia is keen that their current program to subsidise the building of 100 vessels, mainly trawlers and longliners of significant tonnage, to replace their ageing fleet will be dependent on them proving that they have not contributed to overfishing.

On the upside, an agreement has been reached to establish a fund to provide technical assistance to developing nations. This fund will be geared toward helping developing nations adapt their domestic fisheries systems to comply with the rules that might emerge out of a WTO deal.

Whether the current negotiations are enough to have a deal finalised will be revealed at the WTO’s 12th Ministerial Conference scheduled for 30th November in Geneva.

According to research by Pew Charitable Trusts, what is at stake is the chance to boost the number, or biomass, of all the world’s fish by 12.5 percent by 2050.

That’s 35 million metric tonnes of fish by eliminating the most destructive fisheries subsidies.

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