

NAFO adopts blueprint for action to protect the high seas from bottom trawling

7 May 2008 Montreal, Canada. - The Northwest Atlantic Fisheries Organization (NAFO) today adopted a comprehensive agreement to manage high seas bottom fisheries in the Northwest Atlantic. NAFO members include Canada, the European Union, Norway, Iceland, Russia and the US.

The agreement reached today is designed to implement a United Nations General Assembly resolution adopted in 2006, which called for urgent action to protect deep-sea corals and other vulnerable ecosystems from the impacts of bottom fishing on the high seas. The General Assembly called on NAFO and other regional fisheries treaty organizations to fully implement the UN resolution by December 2008.

NAFO has agreed that all bottom high seas bottom fishing will be subject to impact assessments by the end of 2008, and that fishing areas should be closed or fisheries prohibited where damage to corals, sponges and other deep sea species cannot be prevented. NAFO has set itself an ambitious work schedule over the next several months to complete the assessments and begin identifying areas on the high seas that require protection.

"The decisions made this week mark a significant step forward in a global shift to more sustainable fishing practices and dealing head on with the destructive impact of deep-sea bottom trawling," said Susanna Fuller of the Ecology Action Centre in Halifax, Nova Scotia. "The real task now is establishing regulations to implement this decision in line with the UN's December 31, 2008 deadline."

"The largest fleet of high seas bottom trawlers in the world operates in the Northwest Atlantic and we're pleased that NAFO has agreed to implement most of the key provisions of the UN General Assembly resolution," said Matthew Gianni, Political and Policy Advisor to the Deep Sea Conservation Coalition.

Cold-water corals, sponges and other deep-sea habitat forming species occur throughout the high seas areas of the Northwest Atlantic where bottom fisheries take place. In a report published by the United Nations Environment Programme in 2004, bottom trawling was identified as the most serious threat to deep-sea ecosystems.

"We called for a moratorium on bottom trawling at the UN General Assembly, because high seas areas were not protected," said Beth Hunter of Greenpeace Canada. "The agreement adopted by NAFO today, if properly implemented, could set a precedent for protection of deep-sea ecosystems across the whole of the North Atlantic."

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