

## **Conservation Organizations call on NAFO to Protect Deep Sea Species**

Conservation organizations from across Canada and Europe have called on Canada, the European Union, Russia, Iceland, Norway, Japan, the United States and others to urgently agree to protect deep-sea species in the Northwest Atlantic. The Northwest Atlantic Fisheries Organization (NAFO) meets in a special session this week in Montreal to decide on regulations to protect corals and other vulnerable deep-sea species from bottom fisheries on the high seas.

The United Nations General Assembly, in 2006, 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 measures to protect these ecosystems by December 2008 or else prohibit high seas bottom fishing. At the time, Canada applauded the UN resolution. The European Union, amongst others, while voting for the UN resolution, criticized the resolution as not going far enough to protect deep-sea ecosystems.

Nonetheless, both the European Union and Canada have put forward proposals for the NAFO meeting this week that fall far short of implementing the UN agreement. The European Union (EU) proposal, in particular, is weak on both substance and timelines and is at odds with repeated statements by the EU that it is committed to effectively regulating high seas bottom fisheries to protect deep-sea species. The EU has the largest fleet of vessels bottom trawl fishing on the high seas of the Northwest Atlantic. The U.S. is the only member country of NAFO to call for full implementation of the UN resolution by NAFO.

"We are deeply disappointed with the failure of the European Union to propose regulations consistent with its stated commitment to implement the UN resolution to protect deep-sea ecosystems from high seas bottom fishing" said Matthew Gianni, spokesman for 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.

"The decisions made this week by the 13 members of NAFO will set the stage for the future of the Northwest Atlantic," said Susanna Fuller of the Ecology Action Centre, based in Halifax, Canada. "Canada, in particular, has a major responsibility to follow through on its commitment to implement the UN General Assembly resolution agreed in 2006."

In 2006, conservation organizations, scientists, and many governments called for a UN moratorium on bottom trawling in the high seas. While the UN General Assembly did not agree to a moratorium, countries of the world pledged to implement new measures to assess the impacts of all high seas bottom fishing, to close areas where deep-sea corals and other vulnerable ecosystems are known or likely to occur, and prohibit bottom fishing on vulnerable marine ecosystems unless they can prevent the destruction of these ecosystems by December 31, 2008.

"The onus is now on the nations that fish outside Canada's 200 mile limit to adopt measures that ensure that the blueprint for action that they have agreed to at the

UN General Assembly is translated into real action on the water” said Beth Hunter of Greenpeace Canada.

Twelve organizations together with the Deep Sea Conservation Coalition sent a letter this week to NAFO members stating that “The effective implementation of the UN General Assembly resolution by NAFO is a matter of utmost concern to our organizations and many other NGOs, deep-sea scientists and others from around the world.”

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All contacts will be attending the Extraordinary Meeting of NAFO May 5-7 in Montreal, Quebec.

Background Information

United Nations General Assembly Resolution 61/105 adopted in December 2006 calls on regional fisheries management organizations (RFMOs) to:

- Assess whether individual bottom fishing activities would have significant adverse impacts on vulnerable marine ecosystems (VMEs) such as cold-water corals, seamounts and hydrothermal vents and, if so, manage such fishing to prevent such impacts or prohibit bottom fishing;
- Identify the locations of VMEs and determine whether bottom fishing would cause significant adverse impacts to either the VMEs or the long term sustainability of deep sea fish stocks;
- Close areas to bottom fishing where VMEs are known or likely to occur , based on the best available scientific information, and not allow such fishing to proceed unless conservation and management measures are in place to prevent significant adverse impacts on VMEs;
- Cease bottom fishing if a VME is encountered during the course of fishing operations and report the location so that appropriate measures can be adopted in respect of the relevant site.

The resolutions calls on RFMOs to “adopt and implement” these measures by December 31, 2008. .

UNEP 2004 - Friewald, A., Fosså, J.H., Koslow, T., Roberts, J.M. 2004. Cold-water coral reefs. UNEP-WCMC, Cambridge, UK.

“Active gear that comes into contact with the sea floor is considered the greatest threat to cold-water coral reefs and includes bottom trawls, dredges, bottom-set gillnets, bottom-set longlines, and pots and traps...Due to their widespread use, bottom trawls have the largest disruptive impact of any fishing gear on the seabed in general and especially on coral ecosystems” (Pages 37 & 38)