

Oceana · Center for International Environmental Law · Defenders of Wildlife · Environmental Defense ·  
Friends of the Earth · Greenpeace · Natural Resources Defense Council · National Wildlife Federation ·  
The Ocean Conservancy · U.S. Public Interest Research Group · World Wildlife Fund

December 9, 2005

Ambassador Rob Portman  
U.S. Trade Representative  
Executive Office of the President  
600 17<sup>th</sup> Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20508

Dear Ambassador Portman:

We the undersigned are writing to express our strong support for efforts in the negotiations currently underway in the World Trade Organization (WTO) to strengthen the rules related to fisheries subsidies. The fisheries subsidy negotiations are an historic opportunity for the WTO to show that it can carry out its mandate to promote trade while "seeking both to protect and preserve the environment and to enhance the means of doing so in a manner consistent with [Members'] respective needs and concerns at different levels of economic development."

The issue is critical, not just for the WTO but for the world's oceans and for sustainable development. Nearly a billion people depend on fish as their primary source of protein, and millions depend on fishing for all or part of their income – with dependence highest in the developing world.

But the figures are stark. Fish populations, as well as many ocean species, have declined to a fraction of their historic natural levels. According to *The State of the World Fisheries and Aquaculture 2004* by the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization, more than 75% of the world's fisheries are now overexploited, fully exploited, significantly depleted or recovering from overexploitation. These stocks include many of high commercial value. In addition, because many of these stocks are at the top of the marine food chain, their depletion is disrupting marine ecosystems worldwide.

There is no longer any doubt that high levels of subsidies worldwide have significantly contributed to this state of affairs. Estimates by the World Bank, Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), the Friends of Fish nations, and other organizations, suggest that subsidy levels amount to at least \$15 billion annually – equivalent to more than 20% of the value of the world's commercial fish catch. These subsidies contribute to excess fishing capacity and overfishing. Some even fuel illegal, unregulated and unreported (IUU) fishing – one of the most serious obstacles to improving fisheries management today.

Moreover, while exact information about subsidy programs is difficult to obtain because of a general lack of transparency, resulting from poor compliance with the notification requirements in the WTO Subsidies Agreement, it is reasonably clear that a handful of countries account for the bulk of the most harmful subsidies. This takes away a level playing field for fishing communities in other countries, including the United States. Developing countries and coastal communities are among the most disadvantaged, since many are unable to develop their own fisheries because of competition from subsidized distant water fleets.

Portman/Fisheries Subsidies

December 8, 2005

Page 2

Action in the WTO is urgently needed to help put the world's fisheries back on the road to health. We have been encouraged by developments in the negotiations so far to prohibit harmful fisheries subsidies. But much more work remains to be done. To make a concrete, real world difference, the negotiations should result in an agreement on strong and enforceable rules that include:

- Strong disciplines within the existing "traffic light" architecture of the current WTO Agreement on Subsidies and Countervailing Measures, including a prohibition of harmful subsidies that lead to overcapacity, overfishing, and IUU fishing;
- Recognition that some fisheries programs serve important policy goals, e.g., those that help reduce fishing capacity and effort, reduce bycatch, or improve fisheries management;
- Significant improvements in transparency and accountability, including more effective WTO notification requirements; and
- Appropriate treatment of the special concerns of developing countries and small-scale fishermen.

We strongly urge the United States continue its leadership in the fisheries subsidies negotiations. The long-term health of the oceans and the fishing communities that depend on them are in the balance.

Yours sincerely,

Andrew F. Sharpless  
Chief Executive Officer, Oceana

Rodger Schlickeisen  
President, Defenders of Wildlife

Brent Blackwelder  
President, Friends of the Earth

Frances Beinecke  
Executive Director, Natural Resources Defense Council

Roger T. Rufe, Jr.  
President & CEO, The Ocean Conservancy

Carter Roberts  
President, World Wildlife Fund

Daniel Magraw  
President, Center for International Law

Fred Krupp  
President, Environmental Defense

John Passacantando  
Executive Director, Greenpeace

Larry J. Schweiger  
President & CEO, National Wildlife Federation

Gene Karpinski  
Executive Director, U.S. Public Interest Research Group

cc: Secretary of Commerce Carlos Gutierrez