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Fishery Products

WWF calls for moratorium on bluefin tuna farming in Mediterranean

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Report Highlights:

Profits to be made in Atlantic bluefin tuna fattening have lead Italian companies to invest in this business. A World Wildlife Fund (WWF) report highlights the potential risk of spreading exotic diseases by feeding tunas with small frozed pelagics imported from extra-Mediterranean areas. The report calls for replacement of small pelagics with processed formulated feed. Despite recent EU Commission efforts, there are still some gray regulatory areas in Italian and Mediterranean tuna farming industry.

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Background

Bluefin tuna (*Thunnus thynnus*), unlike other tuna varieties that are mainly used for canning, is a very high value-added product as it is mainly consumed raw in preparations such as sushi and sashimi. Japanese buyers are willing to pay high prices for Bluefin sashimi (raw tuna fillets) due its size, color, high fat content, texture and taste. The high price is also driven by this tuna species relative scarcity.

Bluefin tuna in the western Atlantic migrate to feeding grounds in Europe and the Mediterranean. They also travel to spawning grounds in the Gulf of Mexico and the eastern Mediterranean.

The Italian tuna fishery has seen some dramatic changes in the last five years. The most relevant was the enforcement of the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tuna (ICCAT) regulation on the bluefin tuna quota system. In 2002, ICCAT fixed the Total Allowable Catch for the East Atlantic and Mediterranean bluefin tuna at 32,000 t for the years 2003, 2004, 2005 and 2006.

To better enforce the quota system, the Italian government adopted a domestic legislation, identifying all the vessels fishing for bluefin tuna and assigning them individual quotas, shared among gears.

Economic gains from Atlantic bluefin tuna fattening in pens have lead the private sector to invest in this business. There are currently 47 farming facilities reported as authorized to operate for farming of bluefin tuna caught in the ICCAT convention area (10 countries). The complete list of them is available at <http://www.iccat.es/ffb.htm>. Six of them are in southern Italian regions (Sicily, Calabria and Campania), the others are in Spain (14), Cyprus (1), Greece (1), Malta (5), Portugal (1), Croatia (8), Morocco (1), Tunisia (4) and Turkey (6).

Whereas as much as 21,000 metric tons of wild-caught live tuna were already farm fattened in 2003, farming capacity in 2004 is incompletely reported by ICCAT at 31,652 metric tons. New farms are proliferating along Mediterranean shores, notably around Sicily and off Murcia, Spain, as well as Malta, Croatia, France, Tunisia and Algeria.

Bluefin tuna fishing takes place in summer when the schools migrate towards the traditional reproduction areas around the Balearic Islands, in the Tyrrhenian Sea, and in central Mediterranean area. Upon capture, the tuna are transferred to floating cages that are then very slowly pulled towards the coast with towboats. The fish are then transferred to large round cages with a 90-metre diameter or similar sized rectangular cages placed at a few hundred metres off the coast. After fattening, bluefin tunas are air freighted to Japan, around New Year's eve, when demand and prices are the highest on the Japanese market

It is very hard to quantify Italian tuna landings. According to ICCAT the Italian system "is quite complicated to monitor (due to the high number of landing places along the Italian coasts), even with the requirement that each vessel has to submit a statistical declaration of catches. Any non-utilized or undeclared small percentage of catches by single vessels could add up to important quantities at a national level, and for this reason new improvement in the data collection systems are envisioned. As concerns the bluefin tuna fishery, the catches match the quota but the monitoring of this important fishery are increasing due to tuna farming.

For example, only a minor quantity of tuna purse seine catches were landed in Italy in 2001. Most of the tunas were sold at sea in international waters and moved into floating cages in other countries. As a consequence, it was impossible to obtain a size distribution of these catches from actual landings and this problem is expected to increase in the future. All the catches obtained by other systems show small variations."

Italian exports of bluefin tuna fresh and frozen (HS codes 030235 – *Thunnus thynnus* fresh and refrigerated; 030345 - *Thunnus thynnus* frozen) to the world, EU25 and Japan boomed in 2004. Panama became the third largest export market for Italian bluefin tuna.

| Italian exports to: | 2003 | 2004 | 04/03 change |
|---------------------|------------|--------------|-----------------|
| | Tons | | |
| EU25 | 457 | 820 | 79% |
| Japan | 171 | 451 | 164% |
| Panama | 0 | 211 | |
| United States | 14 | 37 | 164% |
| Others | 0 | 1 | |
| World | 642 | 1,520 | 137% |

Source. Italian Trade Statistics

The WWF claim

The World Wildlife Fund issued a report called "Risk to local fish populations and ecosystems posed by the use of imported feed fish by the tuna farming industry in the Mediterranean" on April 2005. According to this report tuna farming can pose serious threats to other fish species and to the fishing industry. The key risk factor is feed.

Tuna are fattened in pens for about 6 months. During this period they are fed whole bait fish (small and medium pelagic species). Most of it consists of imported frozen, untreated fish, from outside the Mediterranean region. The WWF report quotes other ICCAT studies reporting typical feeding composition in Italy consisting of sardines (10-15%), mackerel (40-45%), herrings (30-35%), anchovies (3-5%) and squids (3-5%).

According to WWF "the specific environmental risk of disease transmission to wild local fish populations mediated by the massive dumping of whole imported untreated baitfish by the aquaculture/fish farming industry still remains completely unaddressed by the EU, as well as by Mediterranean states hosting tuna farms. It is important to stress that this risk is of an environmental nature rather than a typical feed quality issue related to either livestock or consumer health (the principles currently governing EU health standards as applied to feed imports)."

WWF calls for an immediate ban on the use of untreated baitfish from outside the Mediterranean region and proposes processed formulated feed as a viable alternative. A regulation of this kind is already enforced in Denmark.

EU Commission and industry involvement

The European Union issued a Regulation (896/2004) in April 2004 that sets new rules for tuna farming in compliance with ICCAT standards:

- a) all Member States have to keep a register of tuna farms, as well as of all vessels authorized to fish for tuna for fattening and for transfer to cages;
- b) authorized vessels have to declare catches and transfers to cages;
- c) tuna farms have to keep a register of the in stock for fattening and of the product they sell on the market.

These measures were aimed at monitoring tuna fattening industry in Europe and were accompanied by Commission visits to production sites and scientific research.

Last April 28, 2005 Medisamak (the recently-created fishery association of fishery industries of the Mediterranean basin) wrote to EU Commissioner Borg to "formally request the creation a working group on Mediterranean bluefin tuna in which Medisamak EU organisations concerned by bluefin tuna would be consulted and informed by the Commission as often as required by the work programme of the ICCAT Regional Fisheries Organisation."

Comments

WWF echoes complaints of Italian environmental groups and local associations that have expressed concerns for potential introduction of exotic diseases. Another debated issue is management of waste produced by highly intensive tuna farms.

If formulated feed is mandated for use by the tuna farming industry, an opportunity may be created for protein meals such as soybeans. Post does not have adequate on tuna feed nutritional requirements to evaluate this possible market opportunity.