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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
September 7, 2011

U.S., European Union to strengthen cooperation to combat illegal fishing

NOAA Administrator Dr. Jane Lubchenco and Maria Damanaki, European Union commissioner for maritime affairs and fisheries, will sign a historic statement today pledging bilateral cooperation to combat illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing, known as IUU fishing—a first for the longstanding partnership between the U.S. and the E.U. on fisheries management.

The European Union and United States rank first and third, respectively, as the world's top seafood importers (Japan is second). Globally, illegal fishing deprives legal fishermen and coastal communities of up to \$23 billion of seafood and seafood products annually. This puts honest fishermen at a disadvantage in the global marketplace. The U.S. and the E.U. recognize their responsibility to protect the oceans' vital food and biodiversity resources.

In today's statement, the U.S. and the E.U. make it clear that they are committed to cooperating on combating IUU fishing as the only effective way of ending these practices. Among other things, they agree to work together to support the adoption of effective management measures in regional and international organizations to combat IUU fishing; promote tools that prevent IUU operators from benefiting economically from their illegal activities; exchange information on IUU activities; and promote the sustainable use of fisheries resources while preserving marine biodiversity.

"Illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing is one of the most serious threats to American fishing jobs and fishing communities, as well as to the health of the world's oceans," said Dr. Lubchenco, who is also under secretary of commerce for oceans and atmosphere. "International cooperation across oceans will help us maintain a level playing field for our fishermen by strengthening enforcement and preventing illegal fishing."

"IUU fishing is a criminal activity, and we have the duty to do everything possible to stop this practice," said Damanaki. "Today's agreement will help us to do just that. By joining forces, we make it harder for culprits to get away with their dirty business."

Individually, the United States and the E.U. have already put in place a number of legal measures to combat IUU fishing, such as the U.S. High Seas Driftnet Fishing Moratorium Protection Act that identifies countries engaged in IUU fishing and an E.U. regulation that blocks illegal seafood imports without the required certifications. Both participate actively in international fishery management organizations and promote international instruments to address IUU fishing.

"We will use all the tools at our disposal to clamp down on IUU fishing and prevent illegal seafood from entering our market. With all the sacrifices U.S. fishermen have made, they deserve no less." Dr. Lubchenco said. "The U.S. and the E.U. share common challenges in fisheries management, so working together will bring us closer to achieving a shared vision of sustainable fisheries."

The U.S. is turning a corner in ending overfishing and rebuilding stocks. Landings have increased by more than 200 million pounds and all coastal regions of the country saw increases in total value of these landings in 2010, over last year. Meanwhile, the E.U. is in the process of reforming its Common Fisheries policy designed to rebuild its own fisheries and is looking to learn from the United States' success stories. Beyond domestic boundaries, there is an increasing need for international cooperation, especially among major fishing and seafood-importing nations, to improve global fisheries management of shared marine resources and to preserve the associated employment and other economic benefits of sustainable fisheries.

The document signed today by the United States and the European Union is a building block that will help achieve these goals.

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