

ENVIRONMENT MAY 18, 2011 / 1:24 PM / UPDATED 11 YEARS AGO

EU fishing head wants crackdown on Libya tuna trade

By Reuters Staff

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Tunas are displayed at the Tsukiji market after the New Year's auction in Tokyo January 5, 2011.
REUTERS/Kyodo

BRUSSELS (Reuters) - Europe's fisheries chief called on Wednesday for close monitoring of the trade in bluefin tuna caught in Libyan waters, fearing illegal catches could push the endangered fish closer to extinction amid the chaos of war.

Atlantic bluefin fetch more than \$100,000 each in markets such as Japan, but stocks have plunged by more than 80 percent since the 1970s due to overfishing, many scientists say.

High-tech fishing vessels using echo-sounders are so efficient at locating and netting the fish when they go to spawn in the Mediterranean that a season's quota can be met in just 10 days. Further fishing can inflict long-term damage.

EU fisheries chief Maria Damanaki said no international observers would be onboard the Libyan fleet to monitor and document their catch, after confusion over whether the North African country's fishing boats would sail at all this season.

"On this basis, bluefin tuna caught by the Libyan fleet will be well on track to be deemed illegal," she said in a statement on Wednesday. "I therefore urged EU ministers to monitor the fishing activities of these vessels."

Without observers, any fish caught by the Libyan-registered fleet would not be documented, and Damanaki said that without proper documentation, EU law prohibits their trade, landing, import, export and transshipment.

Nearly half the fishermen in France's main bluefin fishing port, Sete, will be grounded this season because their boats are owned by firms with links to Muammar Gaddafi.

Last November, the agency that governs Atlantic tuna fishing, ICCAT, set a 2011 quota of 12,900 tonnes, of which 5,756 tonnes can be caught by Europe's 408 tuna vessels and 902 tonnes by Libyan ships.

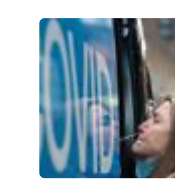
But illegal fishing is widespread, creating a black market that conservationists estimate to be worth about \$400 million per year.

Reporting by Pete Harrison, editing by Rex Merrifield

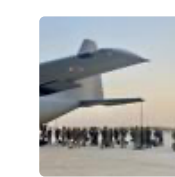
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