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France backs delayed ban on bluefin tuna trade

Ben Hall in Paris and Josh Chaffin in Brussels FEBRUARY 3 2010



France on Wednesday said it would back a ban on the international trade in bluefin tuna but only if implementation was delayed by 18 months.

The shift in the French government's position means Japanese consumers, who eat 80 per cent of the bluefin tuna catch from the Mediterranean, may soon have to go without the prized and increasingly rare fish.

Italy last month said it was "open" to a trade ban, putting pressure on France to follow suit. Scientists, environmentalists and a growing number of governments believe a ban is necessary to prevent bluefin tuna – whose Mediterranean stocks have collapsed in the past 10 years – from disappearing altogether.

Under pressure from its fishing industry, France – along with other Mediterranean European Union members – last year voted against adding bluefin tuna to Appendix 1 of the international convention that governs trade in endangered species, known as Cites, which would entail a ban on international trade but allow tuna to be caught in coastal waters for consumption within the EU.

EU member states are set to meet on February 26 to try to hammer out a common position for Cites. In the interim, they will be waiting for a recommendation from the EU's new fishing and environment commissioners.

The shift in the French position means the EU will probably come down in favour of a Cites 1 listing making a vote in support of a ban much more likely at a meeting of Cites members in Doha in March. But the price of the EU's unity could be an 18-month delay on a ban.

"It was a difficult but necessary decision," said Jean-Louis Borloo, France's environment minister.

Mourad Kahoul, president of the Mediterranean tuna fishermen's union, predicted a "huge crisis" for the fishing industry and demanded an emergency meeting with President Nicolas Sarkozy.

However, environmentalists poured scorn on France's demand for an 18-month breathing space for tuna fishermen before a ban is implemented.

"The government, and Nicolas Sarkozy in particular, are pretending to be the saviours of bluefin tuna," said François Chartier of Greenpeace France. "In fact, they are telling us: 'Let's save the species, but not just yet'."

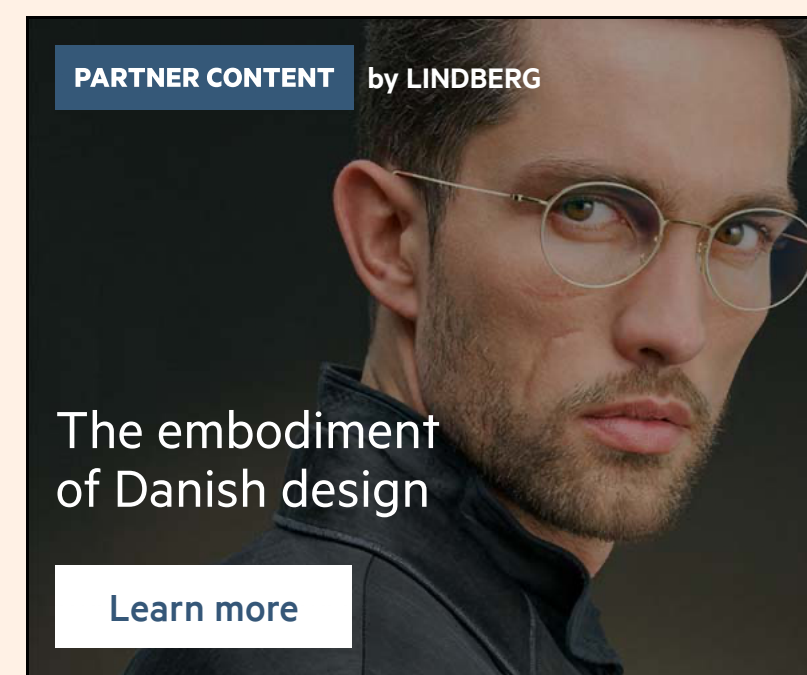
Mr Chartier said an 18-month delay to a ban would allow for two more seasons of tuna fishing – in May and June each year – and deplete stocks to dangerously low levels.

Bluefin tuna stocks in the Mediterranean fell by 60.9 per cent in the 10 years to 2007, according to Ifremer, the French fisheries protection agency.

The French government wants to put off a ban to allow the tuna fishing industry time to cut capacity or diversify into other activities. The delay would also mean that the impact of any ban would be felt well after next month's regional elections.

France's fishing industry accounts for a tiny fraction of the economy, but it is vocal and prepared to take extreme measures, such as blockading ports, to protect its interests.

Governments have often caved in to such pressure. After protests by fishermen in 2008, Mr Sarkozy rushed out an aid package, including fuel subsidies and modernisation grants, financed by a tax on supermarket fish sales.



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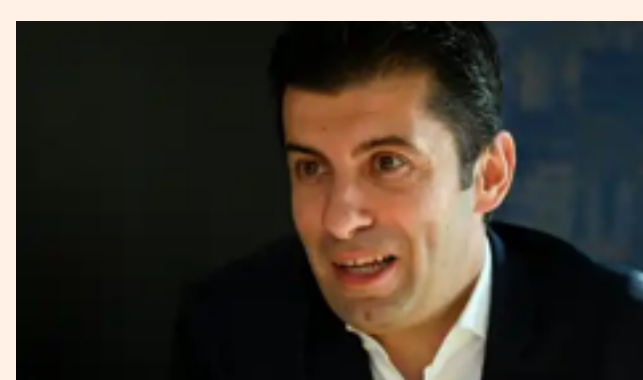
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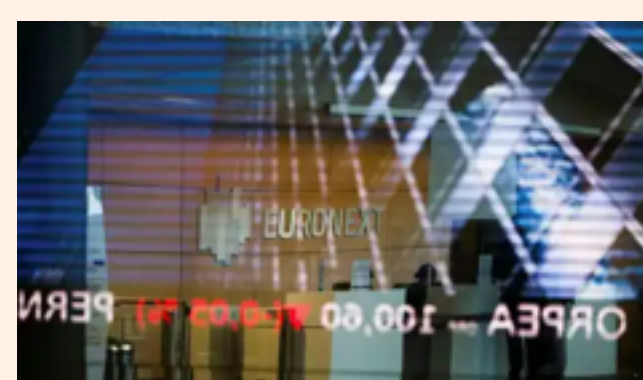
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