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## How the Pacific Trade Pact Could Feed a Hungry Planet

The U.S. wants to end the government subsidies that lead to overfishing and threaten a vital food supply.

By

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With Congress granting trade-promotion authority to the Obama administration last month, negotiations for the landmark Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade agreement should be completed soon. The 12-country Asia-Pacific talks offer an unprecedented opportunity to transform ocean and fisheries conservation.

According to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, 90% of marine fisheries in every region of the world are now significantly depleted or recovering. Chinese fleets, for example, are devastating West African fisheries because countries such as Senegal, Sierra Leone, Guinea Bissau and Guinea have weak enforcement capabilities.

Yet more than 4.5 billion of the world's 7.25 billion people rely on fish as an important source of animal protein. And the U.N. predicts that the world population will grow by nearly 30% by 2050 and require 70% more food. The global population's need for nutrition will be imperiled if overfishing continues—and the TPP offers a big step toward a solution.

Commercial fleets now catch more fish than the seas can provide if oceans are also to rebuild fish stocks for the future. Much fishing overcapacity is due to government subsidies for the construction of vessels, engine upgrades and operating expenses (such as fuel). The University of British Columbia Fisheries Centre, for example, [estimates](#) that “overfishing” subsidies are equivalent to approximately 20% of the global catch. Working with Canada, Australia, New Zealand and others in the TPP negotiations, the United States is seeking to prohibit subsidies for harvests of overfished stocks and illegal fishing. Among its proposed provisions are rules that would prohibit subsidies for fishing by an unlicensed country's fleet within another country's 200-mile exclusive economic zone, harvesting banned species, using banned gear, and fishing out of season. The TPP countries represent one-third of the world's wild catch by weight. Eight of the 12 are among the world's top-20 producers.

Rough [estimates](#) by leading scientists suggest that illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing costs legitimate fishermen \$10 billion to \$23 billion annually, and at least \$6 billion in the Asia-Pacific region. By a wide margin, the U.S. and Japan are the top importers of seafood. Yet a recent study in the [Journal of Marine Policy](#) estimates that 20% to 30% of U.S. seafood imports are caught illegally.

The U.S. has long been a leading advocate for the reform of global fishing subsidies. Republican and Democratic administrations have pressed this case in World Trade Organization negotiations, backed by bipartisan congressional support. The new trade-promotion authority specifies that U.S. negotiators should reduce or eliminate subsidies that decrease market opportunities for U.S. exports or unfairly distort agriculture markets (including fisheries) to the detriment of the U.S.

A trade agreement with antisubsidy provisions could serve important ocean-conservation goals that are not limited to the 12 TPP countries. If other large economies and fishing nations, such as South Korea, join the agreement, the benefits to ocean abundance increase.

A TPP pact also would strengthen the case for conservation in the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership negotiations with the European Union, where the U.S. has also introduced proposals to reform subsidies to fisheries. A global movement for reform could pull in China and other countries, whether through the World Trade Organization or separate negotiations.

Rebuilding an abundant ocean that can feed a hungry planet is a crucial conservation opportunity. The Trans-Pacific Partnership could turn out to be the most important ocean-conservation achievement of this, or any, presidency. Trade, with strictly enforced rules, can deliver good conservation outcomes.

*Mr. Zoellick has served as president of the World Bank Group, U.S. trade representative and deputy secretary of state.*