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CITES Sets Sturgeon Caviar Quota for 2010 Fishing Season

Report Categories:

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Report Highlights:

The Convention for International Trade and Endangered Species for Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) lifted a 3 year ban on wild caviar exports from the Caspian sea for the 2010 fishing season, including 3 MT of the most valuable beluga caviar. Russia received a quota allocation of 0.7 MT for beluga caviar. CITES decision is aimed at stabilizing the international caviar market and limiting the sales of counterfeit product from illegal organizations.

General Information:

The Convention for International Trade and Endangered Species for Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) lifted a 3 years' ban on exports of wild caviar from the Caspian sea for 2010 fishing season, including 3 MT of the most valuable beluga caviar. According to CITES' decision, nearly 81 MT of black caviar is allowed for export, including 3 MT of beluga, 17 MT of stellate sturgeon and 27 MT of common sturgeon. Russia received a quota allocation of 0.7 MT for beluga caviar. However, this allocation will not affect the Russian market because in 2002 the Russian government banned commercial sturgeon fishing.

High levels of poaching and illegal trade in the Caspian led to a temporary ban on international trade for wild caviar and other sturgeon products in 2001. At that time illegal trade was 10 times greater than legal trade. This forced Caspian Sea countries to agree on export quotas for the years following 2001, except for 2006-2009.

As a result of CITES decision experts forecast that the total worldwide trade of black caviar will not exceed 83.5 MT. The export share for the five Caspian States (Azerbaijan, Iran, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Russia) is estimated at 3 MT.

According to the document, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan were allocated a zero quota, Russia - 0.7 MT, Iran – 0.8 MT and Kazakhstan – 1.5 MT. CITES allocated quotas for beluga caviar only, which only represents a 2 percent share of the worldwide black caviar market.

International organizations believe that CITES decision is aimed at stabilizing the international market for caviar; by limiting the sales of counterfeit products, thus reducing the market influence from illegal organizations earning significant profits from caviar sales.

According to the representative of the Federal Fishery Agency, since 2002 Russia has not issued export permits for caviar and believes that the domestic ban on caviar trade will remain in place for 10-15 years.

Since 1970, poaching in Russia has reduced the sturgeon population by 90 percent. In 2001-02 alone, the sturgeon stock decreased 40 percent. An effort to stop the rapid depopulation of sturgeon resulted in 2002 as Russia declared the situation critical and banned commercial fishing of sturgeon.

According to official Russian statistics, production of sturgeon caviar in 2008 was estimated at 7.64 MT. According to experts, in theory, the volume of caviar production does not differ much from the volume of caviar in the retail market. Currently, the Russian government does not allow retail caviar sales which are deemed unfit for scientific purposes and reproduction. As a result, customers have either local hatchery or imported sturgeon caviar available to them.

There are 50 aquaculture facilities in Russia for sturgeon breeding, of which 10 facilities are equipped for production of sturgeon caviar. The four largest caviar production hatcheries account for 11.6 MT's of caviar. Diana, in the Vologda province is the largest facility producing 7.5 MT's of caviar in 2009. Followed by Beluga, in Astrakhan, producing 2 MT's; Raskat also in Astrakhan, produces 1.2 MT's;

and the Bashkiriya hatchery in Karmanovskiy accounts for 0.9 MT's for caviar.

According to Russian statistics, the overall fish roe production in 2009 was estimated at 35.096 MT, or 18.4 percent higher than in 2008. In 2009, the total annual production of stellate caviar is estimated at 230 MT.

In 2007, the Russian government introduced a number of measures to curb rampant poaching of biologically valuable marine resources and allow these species to reproduce in their natural habitat. However, to date the situation with sturgeon poaching and illegal trade remains challenging and is difficult to control. The Russian government has not been very successful in reducing the amount of poaching; as a result sturgeon stocks continue to plummet. Scientists estimate that even if the government were able to completely eliminate poaching today, it would take at least 10 years to restock the sturgeon population.

The sale of black caviar is another difficult issue; it is illegal to catch black caviar for commercial sale. Sturgeon can only be caught in the Caspian basin for scientific purposes and hatchery reproduction. Nonetheless, between 200 and 250 tons of black caviar are estimated to be sold annually. Some sources report that poachers supply Moscow about 15 MT per month of illegally harvested sturgeon caviar for its further distribution throughout the country. The price for illegally harvested caviar directly from poachers is 20,000 Ru (\$635) per kilo; in Moscow, these products are resold for 35,000 - 40,000 Ru/kilo.