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WASHINGTON, DC, USA, November 15, 2017 /EINPresswire.com/ -- The government of Mexico, global conservation experts and civil society must urgently focus all efforts on ensuring a gillnet-free Upper Gulf of California and protecting vaquita habitat, WWF emphasized as the current phase of Vaquita CPR (Conservation, Protection, and Rescue) efforts draw to a close.

The presence of vaquita mothers and calves noted during these efforts indicates the world still has a small window of opportunity to save the most endangered marine mammal on the planet. But failing immediate action, a new totoaba fishing season, which could start as early as February, could push the vaquita to extinction.

Vaquita CPR field operations began on October 12 at the recommendation of the International Committee for the Recovery of the Vaquita (CIRVA) and the request of the Mexican government. The project, which involved experts from nine countries, intended to locate, rescue and then temporarily move the vaquitas to an ocean sanctuary off the coast of San Felipe. Field operations to capture as many vaquita as possible were however suspended on November 4, following the death of a vaquita that had been relocated.

“The CPR efforts were a bold move and as they end, we urge all those who care about the vaquita to show similar courage and commitment to ensure a gillnet-free Upper Gulf of California,” said Jorge Rickards, CEO, WWF-Mexico. “As difficult as the last few weeks have been, we have witnessed a small glimmer of hope for the vaquita and it is our collective responsibility to do all we can to ensure a safe and healthy home for vaquitas and the new calves we have seen. Safeguarding the vaquita’s habitat is our one - and only - chance to save the vaquita.”

The biggest threat to the vaquita are fishing nets used to illegally catch the critically endangered totoaba fish, which inadvertently trap and drown the world’s smallest porpoise. In June 2017, following advocacy efforts by WWF and other organizations, the government of Mexico permanently banned the use of gillnets but enforcement remains a challenge, as does the retrieval of nets already in the water.

“Even though the situation seems dire, we cannot give up now, especially when there remains a

glimmer of hope with vaquitas reproducing in the area. Any available resource must be immediately directed to habitat protection in the Upper Gulf of California to ensure strict and full enforcement of the gillnet ban and removal of ghost nets. Illegal fishing cannot be allowed, as that will lead to only one possible outcome: extinction,” added Rickards.

WWF continues to work with the Mexican government and partners such as the Instituto Nacional de Ecología y Cambio Climático (INECC), the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society, and the Whale Museum to remove lost or abandoned ‘ghost’ gill nets from the waters, with the collaboration and experience of local fishermen. From October 2016 to July 2017, the partners have retrieved more than 400 nets.

Simultaneously, WWF is also working on solutions to engage local communities, who depend on the Gulf of California for their lives and livelihoods, to develop sustainable fishing practices and alternative economic opportunities to safeguard the home of the vaquita. With illegal fishing practices pushing the vaquita closer toward extinction every fishing season, involving local communities in diverse conservation measures, such as ghost gear retrieval and monitoring, is key to protecting the species.

“Local communities are among the strongest custodians of natural heritage and resources. We see the community of the Upper Gulf of California as a critical part of any efforts to ensure a healthy and thriving ecosystem, to safeguard their future and that of the vaquita,” said Rickards.

WWF will also continue supporting the critical work of the acoustic monitoring programme, led by INECC, that allows estimation of population trends for the vaquita. New population numbers are expected to be available in December, shortly after the 69th meeting of the CITES Standing Committee where solutions to tackling the illegal totoaba trade will be discussed.

“For decades now, the illegal trade in totoaba swim bladders has been responsible for plummeting vaquita and totoaba numbers. As we strengthen our efforts on the ground in a race against time, Mexico, US and China must collectively crack down on the illegal trafficking to ensure these species - and the Gulf of California - have a chance to survive and thrive,” said Rickards.

The 69th meeting of the CITES Standing Committee will take place in Geneva between November 27 and December 1, 2017.

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