US Launches Trade Complaint Over Mexico’s Failure to Protect Vaquita

Illegal Fishing in Gulf of California Violates USMCA Trade Agreement, Causes Porpoise’s Near-Extinction

WASHINGTON, DC, UNITED STATES, February 11, 2022 /EINPresswire.com/ -- US Trade Representative Katherine Tai formally requested environmental consultations with Mexico Thursday over its illegal fishing. Aimed at protecting the critically endangered vaquita porpoise, the request is the first step under the enforcement and dispute mechanism of the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA), which could lead to trade sanctions against Mexico.

Despite its trade agreement obligations, Mexico is not effectively enforcing its environmental laws, and rampant illegal fishing in the Gulf of California has caused the vaquita’s near-extinction. Thursday’s request is the first time the US government has invoked the USMCA’s environmental consultation provision since the trade agreement took effect in 2020.

“This is a big move that could save these little porpoises from extinction,” said Sarah Uhlemann, international program director at the Center for Biological Diversity. “Illegal fishing is out of control in Mexican waters, and the vaquita is paying the highest possible price. We’re glad the US government is taking Mexico to task for violating its environmental obligations and threatening the vaquita’s existence.”

Only 10 vaquita likely remain on Earth. Vaquita become entangled and die in fishing gear set to catch shrimp, totoaba (a large fish in demand in China for its swim bladder), and other finfish. Yet the Mexican government has repeatedly failed to enforce its own ban on fishing in the vaquita’s Upper Gulf of California habitat. In November, 117 boats were observed in a single day fishing illegally within the “zero tolerance area,” an area so critical for the vaquita that all unauthorized vessels and fishing are banned.

“For the past 25 years, Mexico has repeatedly broken its promises to address illegal totoaba fishing, causing vaquita numbers to plummet as lawlessness and corruption thrive in the Upper Gulf of California,” said DJ Schubert, wildlife biologist at the Animal Welfare Institute. “We welcome today’s action by Ambassador Tai, and urge administration officials to send an unequivocal message to Mexico that it will be held accountable for hastening the vaquita’s extinction.”

In August 2021, conservation groups requested that the US trade representative initiate enforcement proceedings against Mexico over its ongoing failure to protect the vaquita.

“The legal and illegal trade in shrimp and fish from Mexico has been ravaging the vaquita porpoise for decades,” said Zak Smith, director of the Natural Resource Defense Council’s international wildlife conservation program. “It’s been made possible by the framework of poorly designed and enforced trade agreements. Today’s action by the US trade representative signals the possibility of a new approach to tackling environmental destruction caused by international trade. It’s about time and the US should take strong actions against Mexico for pushing the vaquita to extinction.”

The United States and Mexico will now attempt to resolve the dispute through discussions with senior government officials. If they are unable to reach an agreement, the United States may request a formal dispute panel, which can result in trade sanctions.

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