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New Study Shows Eliminating Harmful Subsidies Could Improve Health of U.S. Fisheries

U.S. Direct Fishing Subsidies Equal One-fifth the Value of U.S. Catch

WASHINGTON – A new study published in the *North American Journal of Fisheries Management* reveals that the U.S. government gives more financial support to the fishing industry than previously estimated. The study, conducted by Renée Sharp and Dr. Rashid Sumaila, and supported by the Lenfest Ocean Program, is the most detailed assessment to date of state and federal fishing subsidy programs in the United States. The researchers found that \$713 million per year of direct subsidies, or financial support, goes to the U.S. fishing industry, roughly half of which could contribute to overfishing.

“Through this study we found that previous subsidy numbers were considerable underestimates,” said Renee Sharp, co-author of the study and senior analyst at Environmental Working Group. “Our findings show that direct U.S. fisheries subsidies could be worth roughly one-fifth of the value of the catch itself.”

The researchers found that fifty-six percent of fishing industry direct subsidies in the U.S. could be considered harmful to fisheries. By lowering overhead costs, these subsidies promote increased fishing capacity, which in turn can contribute to overfishing of fish populations. As an example, commercial fishermen are exempt from federal and state fuel taxes, which largely provide money for transportation and infrastructure costs.

The authors also found that of the subsidies given to specific geographic regions, most went to Alaska and the Western Pacific (Hawaii and American Samoa).

“The Western Pacific is an interesting case study because fishing boats in this region catch only two percent of the total amount of U.S. catches, yet they receive around 23 percent of the total subsidies that are assigned by geographic location,” said co-author Dr. Sumaila, an associate professor at the University of British Columbia Fisheries Centre. “We need to step back and look at how disproportionate support to the fishing industry may be affecting different fish populations by region.”

“This study suggests that it may be possible to improve the health of fisheries in the U.S. by aligning federal and state support of the fishing industry with the goal of rebuilding and creating sustainable fisheries,” said Charlotte Hudson, director of the Lenfest Ocean Program.

Editor’s Note: To read the Lenfest Research Series summary of the report, view the full report or download high resolution photographs, visit www.lenfestocean.org.

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The **Lenfest Ocean Program** supports scientific research aimed at forging solutions to the challenges facing the global marine environment. The program was established in 2004 by the Lenfest Foundation and is managed by the Pew Environment Group.