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U.S. GOVERNMENT ALLOWS CONTINUED IMPORT OF BELUGA CAVIAR, DESPITE DECLARING BELUGA STURGEON "THREATENED WITH EXTINCTION"

Conservationists decry government's denial of protection for beluga sturgeon; call on consumers to avoid beluga caviar

(Washington DC - March 3, 2005) The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced today that it would deny immediate protection to imperiled beluga sturgeon and instead would allow beluga caviar imports to continue.

Environmentalists and marine scientists decried the announcement, citing evidence of the fish's precipitous decline in recent years. Caviar Emptor - a coalition of SeaWeb, Natural Resources Defense Council and the University of Miami's Pew Institute for Ocean Science - said it had expected the Service to significantly restrict or ban beluga caviar imports after it placed beluga sturgeon on the threatened species list last year.

The ruling comes after a four-year struggle by conservationists to reverse the decline of the beluga, whose population in the Caspian Sea has plummeted by 90 percent in the past two decades due to overfishing, pollution, habitat loss and lack of effective governmental management. Caviar Emptor has been urging protection for the fish since it petitioned the government in December 2000 to list the fish as endangered under the U.S. Endangered Species Act.

"Science shows that the best chance for recovery would have been to give beluga sturgeon a complete break. Today's decision falls short of that," said Dr. Ellen Pikitch, professor and director of the University of Miami's Pew Institute for Ocean Science. "The candle is burning on both ends for the species, with surveys showing fewer and fewer young fish entering the population and many adults killed for their caviar before having a chance to reproduce. This could mean extinction of the most valuable fish in the world."

Lisa Speer, senior policy analyst for the Natural Resources Defense Council, said, "We are extremely disappointed that the beluga caviar trade was not banned. This decision does not go far enough to provide beluga sturgeon with the protection it needs, especially given that the U.S. is the world's largest importer of beluga caviar."

Today's ruling comes after a tumultuous year for the caviar trade. International wildlife officials froze the global caviar trade for nine months in 2004, only to open it right before the holiday season despite any scientific evidence that the fish had been given sufficient time to recover or that Caspian nations had made significant strides in combating illegal trade. Last year, CITES observed that trade in the Caspian region was three to five times over the legal limit.

Caviar Emptor is calling on consumers worldwide to avoid beluga caviar and to reduce their consumption of caviar from other threatened Caspian sturgeon. If consumers do buy caviar, better choices include environmentally sound aquacultured varieties, such as caviar from sturgeon and paddlefish farmed in the United States.

"It is in the hands of consumers to help save this species," said Dawn Martin, executive director of SeaWeb. "It doesn't make sense to eat the eggs of a threatened species such as beluga sturgeon. There are a number of exquisite American caviars in which we can indulge with pure enjoyment and without guilt."

Even though global trade in beluga caviar has fallen significantly in the past few years, the United States remains the largest importer. International trade declined from 25 tons of beluga caviar in 2001 to just under 9 tons in 2003, of which the United States imported 5.3 tons. Data are from the most recent reports by the World Conservation Monitoring Center, an arm of the United Nations Environmental Program.

Caviar Emptor seeks to protect and restore critically threatened Caspian Sea sturgeon. The coalition has led the effort to list beluga sturgeon under the U.S. Endangered Species Act and has called for a halt to international trade in beluga caviar. Caviar Emptor also supports the long-term reduction of export quotas for other Caspian sturgeon and international funding for improved management and enforcement practices.

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