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U.S. Government Report Shows Tuna Fisheries Are Still a Threat to Dolphins

In an August 2002 report that has just reached the public, U.S. government scientists admit that two dolphin populations in the eastern Pacific Ocean are seriously depleted and may not recover for 200 years, likely because of the deadly chasing and encircling practices employed by the Mexican tuna industry.

The report, apparently kept under wraps for months until the Earth Island Institute made it public on December 5, says that the "northeastern offshore spotted dolphins are at 20% and eastern spinner dolphins at 35% of their pre-fishery levels; and neither population is recovering at a rate consistent with these levels of depletion and the reported kills."

In other words, both dolphin populations are less than half of what they were in the 1950s, when tuna fisheries began using massive "purse-seine" nets to intentionally chase and encircle dolphins, which frequently swim with tuna in this region. An estimated six million dolphins have been killed since the 1950s, reportedly because of this tuna fishing technique. The report's findings were meant to be the basis for the U.S. Department of Commerce's decision on whether to weaken dolphin protections so that the Mexican tuna industry could sell its fish under the "Dolphin Safe" label in the United States. But on December 31, 2002, despite the findings, Secretary of Commerce Donald L. Evans announced a "no significant adverse impact" finding.

Evans's announcement allowed the government to weaken the "Dolphin Safe" label so that tuna caught with the chasing-and-encirclement technique could use the coveted label. This decision not only threatens more dolphins, but also deceives American consumers who have trusted the "Dolphin Safe" label since 1990 when all major U.S. tuna companies adopted it.

The decision could also affect the recovery of eastern Pacific dolphin populations. The government's 100-page report—prepared by NOAA Fisheries' Southwest Fisheries Science Center and based on research conducted from 1997 to 2002—cites three contributing factors as to why these dolphin populations are not recovering, but scientists clearly suspect the eastern Pacific tuna industry as a major factor.

"Despite considerable scientific effort by the fishery scientists, there is little evidence of recovery, and concerns remain that the practice of chasing and encircling dolphins somehow is adversely affecting the ability of these depleted stocks to recover," the report states.

The report suggests that the "chasing and encircling" technique kills

thousands of dolphins a year. Many of them die in the nets, but the inhumane fishing technique also induces stress among dolphins and even separates calves from their mothers, both of which could lead to further mortality.

Some environmental and conservation critics are alarmed that the United States wants to appease Mexico and weaken the "Dolphin Safe" label. The Dolphin Conservation Act, passed in 1997, currently allows for the importation of "dolphin deadly" tuna, but Mexico's fishing industry wants to sell its tuna under the trusted and more coveted "Dolphin Safe" label—without having to change its lethal fishing practices.