



Namibia: Govt Fears Tuna Depletion - As Oil and Gas Exploration Chase Fish Away

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By Shinovene Immanuel

SEISMIC exploration of gas and oil on Namibian waters has led to massive depletion of tuna output from 1 800 tonnes last year to about 650 tonnes so far this year.

This is a far cry from 2011 tuna output, which was 4 000 tonnes.

In response, a government task force that completed its mandate in September this year, recommended that such explorations should be done outside the tuna fishing season.

The task force, commissioned to assess the effects of seismic exploration on the fishing industry, also proposed that research should be conducted on the distance from the tuna migratory route and fishing hotspots, at which seismic surveys can be conducted to avoid interference with fishing.

The Director of Policy Planning and Economics at the Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resources, Anna Erastus, who heads the task force last week told The Namibian that they also proposed that seismic surveys should, preferably, only be carried out from May to September.

"February and March mark the height of the pole and line tuna season in Namibia when around 70% of the catch is taken," she said, adding that the proposed seismic survey is in the main tuna fishing ground south of Namibia.

Research, Erastus pointed out, should also be able to establish the effects of noise pollution on the fish; explore alternative methods of conducting seismic surveys without harming the fish and satellite tagging of tunas to identify migratory routes.

The recommendations further said that the research should look into the period of migration and the behaviour of fish; socio-economic impact of the Large Pelagic sector on the Namibian economy; and analyse the situation holistically and establish all factors that might lead to reduced catches and see them in relation to seismic surveys.

Erastus said the recommendations were forwarded in September this year to the Ministers of Fisheries and Marine Resources Bernhard Esau and his counterpart at Mines and Energy Isak Katali. The other ministerial member of the task force is the Ministry of Works and Transport

She said Esau wrote to his counterpart in South Africa, Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries Minister Tina Joemat-Pettersson, to alert her of the seriousness of the issue.

"It is essential that a responsible coordinated strategy between Namibia and South Africa is developed, otherwise the fishing and oil and gas seismic exploration sectors will not be able to co-exist," she said.

The Large Pelagic and Hake Longlining Association has for years been lobbying government to look into the impact of oil exploration vessels on the tuna industry, which has seen catches dropping.

Matthew Hambuda, the chairman of Large Pelagic and Hake Longlining Association said the low output of tuna has affected the industry, including workers, especially the economy of Lüderitz that relies on income from the pole and line tuna vessels.

According to Hambuda, in 2011, around 450 Namibian fishermen derived income from tuna fishing out of Lüderitz but this has now drastically reduced.

Already, the task force's quest to protect the threatened tuna industry has kicked off with the planned delay of a proposed seismic survey of oil and gas exploration scheduled for February next year in the Orange River Basin.

"The issue is further complicated by the fact that the same company is also proposing to undertake a February survey in South African waters, just across the Namibia-South Africa border. This is in the direct path of tuna migrating from South African to Namibian waters," Erastus explained.

According to Erastus, there are concerns that the proposed February survey seismic sound blasts could send the tuna into avoidance mode, so they are not available to be caught by fishing vessels during what would normally be the height of the pole and line tuna season in Namibia.

Erastus said they are consulting the company over the planned seismic survey and that government is trying to reach a consensus with all stakeholders in the process.

"What has been shown is that the recent reduction in tuna catches over the last three years, parallels significant seismic exploration near the Tripp Sea Mount fishing grounds, and points very strongly to seismic exploration," he said earlier this year.

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Fishing trawler at Walvis Bay, Namibia

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