Peru Seeks to Protect Little Fish with Big Impact

FRANK BAJAK & FRANKLIN BRICENO, Associated Press

CALLAO, Peru (AP) — The ocean off Peru boasts the world's richest fishing grounds, but Taurino Querevalu is returning to port empty again after a hunt for Peruvian anchovy, cursing his empty nets and an increasingly stingy sea.

A little more than a decade ago, Querevalu's 8-ton wooden boat rarely returned with an empty hold as it does on this day motoring back to Lima's port of Callao, the low-slung clouds above as gray as the sea mirroring them.

"There used to be fish for everybody," the 48-year-old trawler captain laments, leaning on the rail as a stiff breeze buffets his leathery brow. "You'd run into immense schools."

Querevalu's frustrated search for the silvery, stiletto-sized fish reflects a voracious, growing global demand for the protein-rich fish meal, and oil, into which nearly Peru's entire anchovy catch is converted. It also reflects unremitting cheating by commercial fleets on quotas and other regulations designed to protect the species.

Not only has overfishing of the Peruvian anchovy, or anchoveta, battered the industry that makes Peru far and away the world's No. 1 fish meal exporter, it has also raised alarm about food security in a nation that had long been accustomed to cheap, abundant seafood.

The drop in the anchoveta population has over the years affected the food chain, as stocks of hundreds of bigger wild fish and marine animals that eat it have also thinned.

Anchoveta thrives in the cold, plankton-saturated Humboldt Current along the coast of Peru and Chile and accounts for about a third of the global fishmeal industry used to fatten farmed seafood and livestock, from salmon in Norway to pigs in China. Like other small "forage fish" that account for more than a third of the world's wild ocean fish catch, nearly the entire anchoveta catch gets ground up into feed and rendered into oil.

It is the "the most heavily exploited fish in world history," according to the U.N. Food and Agricultural Organization.

Peru's government ordered deep cuts in what the country's 1,200-boat commercial fleet could catch in October after anchoveta stocks plummeted to about 5 million metric tons — at the low end of what fishermen would bring in during previous years. While the small fish reproduce rapidly, their overall population is now less than half its volume a decade ago, said Patricia Majluf, a top Peruvian marine scientist.

The government slashed the permitted commercial catch by two-thirds and set rules meant to put more fish on dinner tables in a country whose rural provinces are afflicted by some of the world's highest rates of child malnourishment.

Yet the commercial fleet has continued to cheat, said Paul Phumpiu, Peru's vice minister of fisheries.

"They have no social conscience," he told reporters Monday in announcing new fines of nearly $3 million on commercial companies for illegally harvesting more than 18,000 metric tons of juvenile anchoveta during the three-month fishing season that ended Jan. 31.

"This resource isn't only for the enrichment of a few. It's for the benefit of all of us," Phumpiu said in an earlier interview. "It's a paradox, having a resource so rich that it feeds other parts of the planet but barely reaches Peruvians."

Peru's commercial fishing industry blames climatic problems for the anchoveta's slide. But independent experts say years of overfishing, lax enforcement and cheating on quotas and fines have hurt the population. They also accuse the industry of rampant underreporting of its catch and of endangering stocks by harvesting juveniles.

Majluf said a one-year fishing ban should be imposed to rebuild the population.

Officials balked at that idea, instead setting the lowest quota ever for the commercial trawler fleet at just 810,000 tons for the fishing season that just ended. The government will soon assess anchoveta stocks and determine the quota for the next, mid-year season.

Phumpiu said Peru also is boosting the number of its inspectors, from 60 to 260 to begin with, along the 1,860-mile (3,000-kilometer) coastline and increasing fines for unauthorized catches.

Skeptics doubt the new restrictions will work.

For one thing, an estimated 400,000 tons of anchoveta caught annually goes unreported. "That's the entire (annual) catch of Spain, or Italy," said Juan Carlos Sueiro, a Cayetano Heredia University economist. It's value: about $200 million.

There are also huge loopholes.

Anchoveta quotas only apply to boats in the commercial fleet that works within Peru's 200-mile territorial waters. Those vessels have been responsible for about 94 percent of the catch.

But when boat-by-boat quotas were imposed in 2008, trawlers under 32 tons were exempted. Unrestricted, their numbers swelled.

"Everybody around here got into fishing. Farmers sell their cattle and get into

fishing. Engineers and doctors, they have their profession. But on the side, they buy boats," said Juan Ponce, administrator of the artisanal, or small-time, fishing pier in Pisco, a three-hour drive south of Lima.

With so much overfishing, particularly of anchoveta, fresh fish of all sizes are now scarcer than ever for Peruvians, and seafood prices have risen since 2009 at a rate four times that of other foods.

People "buy more chicken than fish because chicken is cheaper," said Pedro Diaz Sanchez, a wad of bills in his hand thickening as he sells hake by the crate at Lima's Villa Maria del Triunfo fish market.

In fact, whole anchoveta hasn't been available for years. Rendering factories now pay roughly twice as much for anchoveta as wholesalers who cater to human consumption. Peru earns about $2,000 a metric ton for fishmeal and $2,800 a ton for fish oil, a popular ingredient in nutritional supplements, and prices have more than doubled over the past decade.

Local supplies of fish also are hurt by laws that subsidize exports.

"It's cheaper to export fish to Africa than to haul it to Huancavelica," said Carlos Paredes, a San Martin de Porres University economist, referring to a highlands Peruvian province where 55 percent of children under age 5 suffer from chronic malnutrition.

The powerful fishing industry has fought efforts to trim quotas and raise taxes, while some commercial fleet owners challenge in court a backlog of millions of dollars in fines. Last year, fishermen in the northern port of Paita blocked highways and sacked city hall to protest a quota on hake that they considered too low. Two people died in clashes with police.

Hoping to forestall similar unrest, and to get more fish to local markets, the government in September mixed new restrictions on the big anchoveta fleet with incentives for smaller boats. It barred the big, commercial trawlers from within 10 miles of the coast. Previously, the first five miles had been off-limits. Then it created a new category of "medium-sized" boats — between 10 and 32 tons — with exclusive rights to the 5-to-10-mile corridor.

The artisanal fleet of boats of less than 10 tons was given exclusive rights to the first five miles, where most anchoveta spawn.

The government decreed that the small and medium-sized boats would only be permitted to catch fish for human consumption.

But there is blatant cheating amid an almost complete absence of government policing.

At Pisco's artisanal pier on a recent morning, workers removed six tons of anchoveta from the turquoise-hued wooden trawler "El Tio" as pelicans and boobies

picked at the scraps.

The oily fish were loaded onto a flatbed truck that navigated Pisco's dusty streets before disappearing through a eucalyptus grove into an illegal fishmeal factory, one of 15 that Sueiro says operate up and down the coast.

Ponce, the pier administrator, said dozens of the 300 boats at his pier similarly sell anchoveta illegally, especially in these slow days of the Southern Hemisphere summer when people aren't catching much else.

"The anchoveta is the only resource available year-round," said Ponce.

Sueiro, the economist, fears it could one day disappear as an industry, as other fisheries have.

"Twenty years ago we caught nearly 3 million tons of sardines (a year)," he said. "Now, they don't even capture a ton. Commercially, no one in Peru lives off sardines anymore."

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