

CARIBBEAN REGIONAL FISHERIES MECHANISM REQUESTS U.S GOVERNMENT TO REJECT WILDEARTH GUARDIANS PETITION

WASHINGTON, DC, USA, FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 22, 2013--The Caribbean Regional Fisheries Mechanism (CRFM), has made a formal request on behalf of the Caribbean Community to the United States-CARICOM Council on Trade and Investment, to reject the petition of WildEarth Guardians, an environmental NGO based in Denver, Colorado, USA, calling on US authorities to list the Queen Conch (*Strombus gigas*) as a “threatened” or “endangered” species under the USA Endangered Species Act (ESA).

Speaking at a meeting of the Council held in Washington, D.C., on Friday, November 15, CRFM Executive Director, Milton Haughton said: “We oppose the petition to list the Queen Conch as an endangered or threatened species on the ground that the petitioner’s information is unreliable and obsolete.”

The Queen Conch is a high-value species, in high demand on the international market. Haughton noted that such a listing could restrict or prohibit Caribbean imports of Queen Conch to the US.

At the meeting of the US-CARICOM Council on Trade and Investment, senior officials discussed, among other things, the removal of barriers to bilateral trade as important work to be done under the recently inaugurated US-CARICOM Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA).

“If Queen Conch is listed as threatened or endangered under the ESA, conch exports from the CARICOM States to the United States market would be prohibited,” Haughton noted. “This would result in significant social and economic hardship for thousands of Caribbean fishermen, fish processors/exporters and their families, and fishing communities, and undermine peace and stability in coastal communities that rely on the Queen Conch resource, because it will effectively deprive them of their source of income and livelihoods.”

Most of the information presented in the WildEarth Guardians petition in respect of CRFM States is outdated and simply incorrect, the CRFM Executive Director added.

WildEarth Guardians recently threatened suit against US authorities, after it claimed a number of deadlines for action on the petition were missed. The NGO filed the petition in March 2012, and the 12-month finding, was due in March of 2013. A decision on the petition is still pending.

The CRFM Secretariat has consulted with its Member States, and in October 2012, it submitted a response to the US Department of Commerce, rebutting the WildEarth Guardians Petition and asking the US Government to reject the petition.

Meanwhile, WildEarth has filed a legal challenge against the US National Marine Fisheries Service, over the delayed petition decision.

The Queen Conch petition states that the species is declining and threatened with extinction due to habitat degradation, specifically, water pollution and destruction of sea grass nursery habitat; overutilization resulting from commercial harvest, inadequacy of existing regulatory mechanisms, and other natural and manmade factors such as biological vulnerability, human population growth, and other synergistic effects.

Haughton told the US-CARICOM Council on Trade and Investment, though, that the CRFM states disagree with the claim that Queen Conch is being harvested at unsustainable levels, resulting in population declines, stock collapses, as well as recruitment and reproductive failure.

Haughton acknowledged that, “Concerns about the health and long-term survival of Queen Conch and accompanying evidence of population declines in some countries led to the inclusion of Queen Conch on Appendix II of the Convention in International Trade in Endangered Species of Fauna and Flora (CITES) in 1992.”

He explained that the Appendix II listing is used for species that are not necessarily threatened with extinction, but may become so unless international trade in the species is regulated, to avoid utilization incompatible with the survival of the species.

“Since 1992, CITES has been monitoring and regulating international trade and by extension, management, protection and conservation of Queen Conch to ensure sustainable trade and sustainable use more generally,” Haughton said.

According to the CRFM, “the petitioner made no effort to obtain current, readily available information regarding the conservation status and management systems for the Queen Conch fisheries in the 17 CARICOM / CRFM Member States before submitting its petition.”

Haughton said that the listing would be “unreasonable, disproportionate, unfair, inequitable, and inappropriate” in addressing the issues in question. It is an unnecessary and unreasonable barrier to trade in the species, he stated.

The petition should be rejected, as the available evidence does not support the claim that the Queen Conch is a threatened or endangered species, in the context of the Endangered Species Act, Haughton told the US-CARICOM Council on Trade and Investment.