

International waters of the Arctic are up for temporary fisheries closure
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International waters of the Arctic are up for temporary fisheries closure

Arctic coastal states intend to introduce a fishing moratorium in the central part of the Arctic Ocean until sufficient scientific data is available. This will prevent unregulated fisheries in the region.

The international conference “The Arctic: Region of Development and Cooperation” was held by the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC) in Moscow on December 2-3. The American Pew Charitable Trusts and representatives of the US State Department proposed a solution that would prevent unregulated fisheries in international waters of the Arctic Ocean. It was proposed to sign an international agreement that would ensure fisheries regulation in the Arctic enclave. The idea received solid support from experts participating in the conference.

Each year, climate change results in further reduction of the sea ice cover in the Arctic Ocean. International waters of the Central Arctic Ocean occupy an area of about 2.8 million square km. Those waters used to be protected by multiyear ice and no fishing was conducted there. However, in recent years, up to 40% of this area has been free of ice in summer months, particularly north of the Bering Strait in the area adjacent to the Arctic marine boundaries of the US and Russia.

Currently, there is no international regulatory mechanism that could manage commercial fisheries in the Central Arctic Ocean and vessels of any countries can start fishing there at any time. As Fishnews was informed by the Pew Fund, arctic cod is a likely fishing target in this area. This species is the main forage link in the Arctic food chain – this resource supports seals, which in turn, are a food source for polar bears. Arctic cod stocks have not been studied yet, and accidental excessive catch can undermine the entire fragile Arctic ecosystem.

Besides, it is likely that in the future, other fish species will spread into the newly ice-free waters and will be followed by fish trawlers.

“This is a totally natural process, when commercial fishing areas shift following fish migration, we observed that in the Barents Sea”- pointed out the chairman of the Coordination Council of the Northern Basin Fishermen Associations and Fishing Industry Vyachslav Zilanov.

Positions of the Arctic countries in regards to signing the International Fisheries Agreement were discussed within the framework of the “Fishery Regulation Issues in the Arctic Region” section of the conference. The Agreement stipulates the introduction of a voluntary moratorium for commercial fishing in the high seas until necessary scientific data on bioresources (fish stocks) are obtained.

“It is important for Arctic countries to sign an agreement that would regulate fisheries in the central Arctic Ocean, because their interests are directly linked to that region” – emphasized the director of the International Arctic Program of the American Pew Trust Scott Highleyman.

According to the statement of the Inuit Circumpolar Council (Greenland) executive director Alfred Jakobsen, Canada and Greenland have already come forward with the initiative and are ready to support the agreement. “I’ll add that Denmark will do everything to exclude the risk of unregulated fisheries in that region. I want to point out that Danish fishermen follow the principle of conservation and sustainability of marine resources for the needs of the citizens. We appeal to the Arctic Five to accept the International Arctic Fisheries Agreement. Time has come to have it established” – stated Alfred Jakobsen.

“Delay of the Agreement will cost more than signing it” – pointed out the US State Department Deputy Assistant Secretary for Oceans and Fisheries David Balton.

Experts also discussed the need for taking measures towards research and conservation of bioresources of the Arctic Ocean under changing climate and receding sea ice.

“The Agreement on voluntary moratorium is necessary in order to avoid commercial fishing until we have clear information about the Arctic Ocean ecosystem, since there has been almost no scientific research and the Arctic still remains a mystery” – said Scott Highleyman.

The five Arctic coastal states (Russia, USA, Canada, Norway and Denmark on behalf of Greenland) started discussion of the draft agreement in spring 2013 and will continue it in Greenland in February 2014.