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Kazakh Fishermen Boost Fresh Fish Catches in Rising Aral Sea

Two planned World Bank-supported projects will aim to continue refilling shrunken inland sea and improving water management for agriculture

ARALSK, June 19, 2008 — Kazakh fishermen stand to boost their fresh-fish catches in coming years as the Kazakhstan government plans the second phase of a successful World Bank-supported restoration of the once-shrunken Northern Aral Sea, World Bank Group President **Robert B. Zoellick** said today.

“As poor people around the world struggle to keep food on their tables in the face of rising prices, it is gratifying to see that Kazakhstan has found a way to give back fishermen and their families their way of life on the Northern Aral Sea,” said Mr. **Zoellick**. *“The return of the Northern Aral Sea shows that man-made disasters can be at least partly reversed, and that food production depends on the sound management of scarce water resources and the environment.”*

The first project in the second phase, still being discussed with the Kazakh authorities, would continue the recovery of the Northern Aral Sea by building a second dike. This will raise the waters to a level where they will reach the former port of Aralsk and expand the fishable waters in the sea so that catches of fish such as sturgeon and flounder will climb from about 50 tons per year in 2004 to 5,000 tons a year upon completion of the next phase of the project in 2015.

The second project would support the Kazakh government’s efforts at improving agricultural production by improving the efficiency of water use in agriculture and reduce demands on scarce water resources. Although agriculture accounts for only 8 percent of Kazakhstan’s national output, it employs nearly one in three people and provides more than half of the income in the country’s rural poor areas. Under the planned project, the government would improve the irrigation and drainage systems that service 220,000 hectares of irrigated land in the Syr Darya Basin for the production of crops such as sugar beets, rice, cotton, and fodder.

Mr. **Zoellick**’s visit to this former port town on the Aral Sea, which now sits some 25 kilometers away from a steadily rising sea, was part of the World Bank president’s first visit to Kazakhstan. Following meetings in the capital of Astana, he flew to the Aral Sea to preview two World Bank-supported projects planned to further restore the Northern Aral Sea and to improve water and irrigation systems in the surrounding area.

The Aral Sea, located in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, once ranked as the world's fourth largest lake. Between 1960 and 2004, the sea's surface area shrank almost 70 percent and the sea level dropped about 20 meters, as water was diverted from the rivers that fed the sea for irrigation. The drying up of the sea caused serious economic and environmental damage and hardship for the people who relied on the sea for a living. Fresh fish production virtually disappeared. The salinity and pollution levels rose dramatically, dust and salt storms occurred often, and local climatic changes took place. Drinking water supplies became polluted and human health problems increased sharply. Tens of thousands of jobs were lost in the fishing, agriculture, and service sectors.

The Aral Sea's fortunes, however, began to reverse in 2001 when the World Bank and Kazakh Government teamed up to build a 13 kilometer-long dike that separated the northern Aral Sea from the southern part of the Sea, and to put in place better water management systems for the waters flowing into the sea. Thanks to the \$86 million project, which included a \$64.5 million loan from the World Bank, the dike was completed in August 2005. Today, the waters of the Northern Aral Sea have filled up to the dike, which has made them less saline and enabled fish catches to rise from only 52 tons in 2004 to 2,000 tons in 2007.

The return of the Northern Aral Sea has had ripple effects across the economy in the area. Prior to 2004, there were only two fish processing plants. But since 2004, two fish processing plants and three fish receiving centers have opened; with two more processing plants opening in 2008. And for the first time in many years, freshwater fish were exported this year to Georgia, Russia and Ukraine. Another new factory is building fiberglass fishing boats. Fish hatcheries are expected to release 15 million fingerlings next year, including the reintroduction of sturgeon. Meanwhile, the climate is improving, benefiting air, soil and water qualities, biodiversity and flora/fauna. Cleaner water is improving the health of the population.

To learn more about the return of the Aral Sea, click for a multimedia package, including videos, a slideshow and background materials:

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