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INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Ban on caviar partially lifted

A move by a U.N.- sponsored organization lets Caspian Sea nations legally sell limited amounts of caviar.

By Frank Jordans

Associated Press

GENEVA - A United Nations panel has lifted a ban on international trade in several types of caviar from the Caspian Sea, but it still hasn't decided whether to permit exports of the highly prized -- and hugely expensive -- beluga variety, an official said Tuesday.

The move by a U.N.-sponsored conservation organization means that Azerbaijan, Iran, Kazakhstan, Russia and Turkmenistan can legally sell limited amounts of the gourmet delicacy on the world market in 2007.

Last year, the U.N. Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, known as CITES, banned the global trade in most Caspian caviar -- the processed eggs of the sturgeon -- to help protect the endangered fish.

Only Iran was allowed to export caviar from certain fish that are more abundant in its waters. The website of a Seattle caviar company offers one type of Iranian caviar for \$2,960 per pound. Beluga caviar, still under a U.N. ban, can sell for \$5,000 a pound or more, depending on taste and quality.

"This is very good news," said Armen Petrossian, whose family business in Paris has been selling caviar for more than a century. "It's very important that there is a legal trade in order to support the restocking efforts."

The legal market in caviar is about 100 tons annually, he said, and worth about \$265 million. The black market, supplied by poachers, is about the same size, Petrossian estimated.

The U.N.'s 2006 ban "undoubtedly helped to spur improvements to the monitoring programs and scientific assessments carried out jointly by the five Caspian neighbors," CITES Secretary-General Willem Wijnstekers said.

The Caspian nations -- all former Soviet states, except Iran -- have made great progress in their conservation efforts, said CITES chief scientific officer David Morgan. But he

added: "I can't disguise the fact that the situation is still serious in all countries of origin for all sturgeon species."

The Caspian's sturgeon population has declined by more than 90 percent in the last century, he said.

"That's why we have to redouble our efforts together with the countries concerned to make sure that we can rebuild the sturgeon stocks in the interests of the species and the local people who are using them," Morgan said.

Under the U.N. action, caviar and meat from the Caspian stocks of Russian sturgeon, Persian sturgeon and stellate sturgeon can now be legally traded on the world market.

CITES, based in Geneva, sets annual quotas for caviar exports that are recognized by many countries. Its 2006 quota for caviar from beluga sturgeon and several other Caspian species was zero.

Although CITES has lifted its effective ban on the trade in three species, its export quotas for those species are still on average 15 percent lower compared with 2005.

CITES postponed for a month a decision on whether to permit the export of caviar from the rare and expensive beluga sturgeon to give the five Caspian nations time to provide more information on the health of their beluga sturgeon stocks.