

# WTO to look into US rules on 'dolphin-safe' tuna

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The World Trade Organization will consider a complaint by Mexico next week alleging that U.S. rules on "dolphin-safe" tuna are illegal, according to an agenda released Tuesday.

Mexico says U.S. labeling restrictions effectively exclude Mexican tuna from the U.S. market and have caused a third of the nation's tuna fleet to shut down.

The Latin American country claims its tuna production complies with international standards on reducing the accidental capture of dolphins. But it says U.S. rules prohibit Mexico from using the "dolphin-safe" label needed to sell the product in the United States.

The U.S. mission to the WTO could not comment.

The issue of tuna and dolphins is a sensitive one that pits environment against trade, and originated with the WTO's predecessor body, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade.

Mexico won a case in 1991 over a U.S. law that banned imports of tuna caught in nets that also harm dolphins, but the old rules allowed the loser to simply ignore the ruling by exercising its veto power.

The WTO, created in 1995, has stricter enforcement powers and can authorize sanctions against countries that violate international trade agreements \_ but usually after years of litigation.

Washington can delay the establishment of a panel at the March 20 meeting of the WTO's dispute body. It cannot do so a second time, meaning the trade body will likely launch a formal investigation by April at the latest.

Also on the agenda for next week's WTO meeting is a complaint by Thailand over U.S. taxes on imports of plastic bags.

The WTO has consistently ruled against Washington's calculations of duties for foreign goods it suspects are being sold in the U.S. at below-market prices.