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Mauritania's fishmeal production halves as human consumption prioritized

In a bid to ensure food security and prioritize direct human consumption over industrial processes, Mauritania introduced a regulation in 2023, placing a cap on the amount of pelagic catches processed for indirect human consumption

By Matilde Mereghetti | Feb. 16, 2024 08:09 GMT



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In a bid to ensure food security and prioritize direct human consumption over industrial production, Mauritania introduced a regulation in 2023 placing a cap on the quantity of pelagic catches processed for indirect human consumption.

The regulation restricts each factory to process a maximum of 4,000 metric tons, a move aimed at curbing the excessive production of fishmeal and fish oil.

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Mauritania proposed the introduction of these new rules in 2017 when it stated its intention to implement measures to gradually reduce and ultimately eliminate the production of fishmeal and fish oil by 2020.

According to a recent analysis by the International Fishmeal and Fish Oil Organization (IFFO), the implementation of this regulation last year has had a significant impact on the country's fishmeal and oil factories.

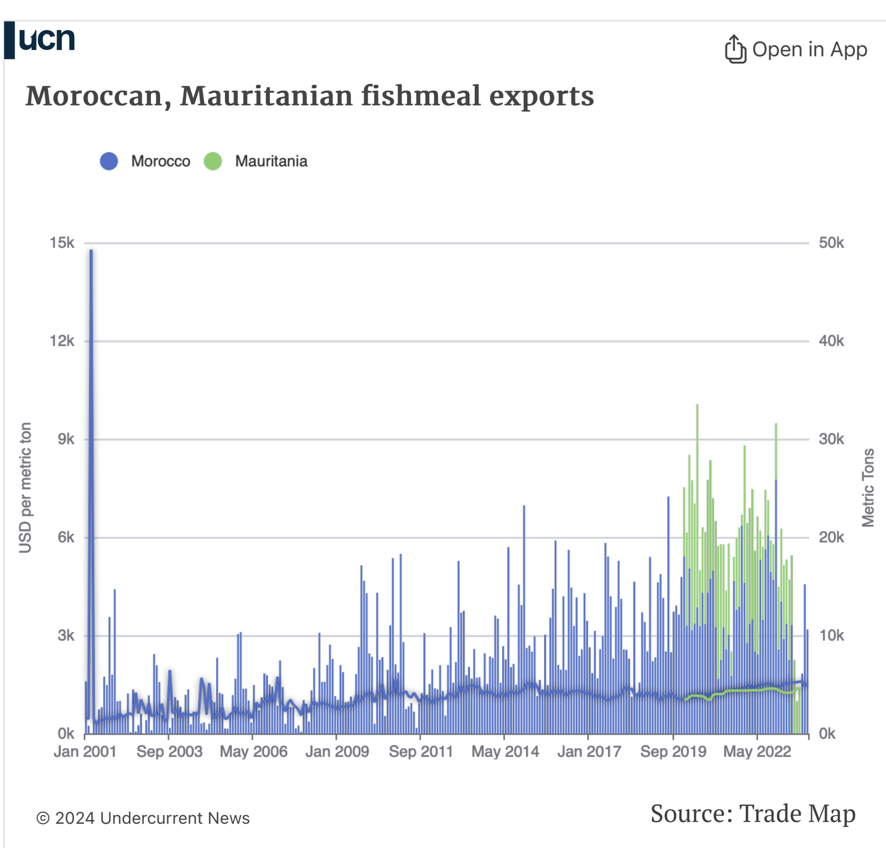
Production levels of fishmeal in the country have plummeted, with a staggering halving of output compared to a year before. This decline reflects a concerted effort to redirect fish resources towards direct human consumption, thereby addressing concerns regarding food security within the nation.

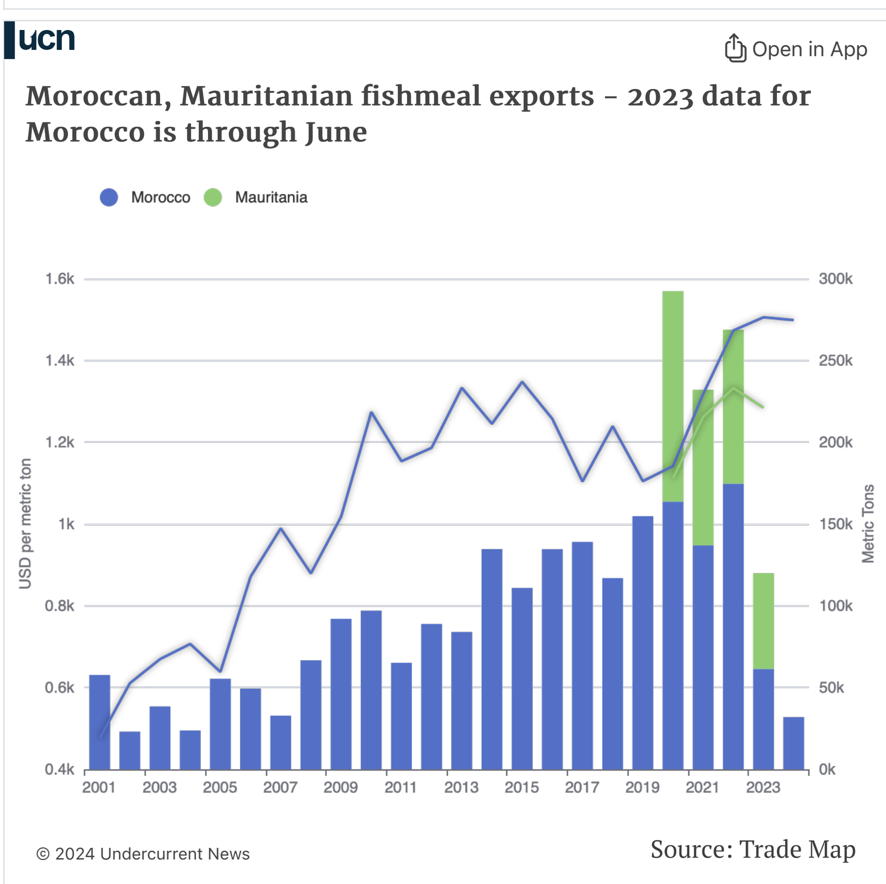
"The new regime in Mauritania (whereby fish should be destined to direct human consumption first) yielded a 40% drop in the production of marine ingredients in 2023 vs 2022. Fish raw material for reduction is mainly made of by-products now," the Marine Ingredients organization (IFFO) wrote to *Undercurrent News* by email.

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Enrico Bachis, IFFO's market research director, told *Undercurrent* last October that he did not expect an increase in the African fishmeal output in 2023 because it was estimated that, in Mauritania, production would drop sharply from 100,000t a year before.

In Morocco, one of the world's top ten exporters, a similar regulation is also in place. Morocco and Mauritania are Africa's largest producers of fishmeal and fish oil. The production in those two countries is unlikely to increase in the short term, according to IFFO.





The years before this regulation was introduced were characterized by a substantial increase in catches of sardinella by both national and chartered foreign fleets operating in Mauritanian waters. While this increase in catches may initially seem beneficial, it was driven primarily by the demand for raw materials by fishmeal factories, exacerbating food security challenges in West Africa, according to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).

The FAO has expressed concerns about the potential consequences of increasing fishmeal production, particularly if it continues to rely on edible fish. Such a scenario could worsen the already critical situation regarding fish availability and affordability, posing severe challenges to food security in Mauritania and beyond.

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In 2020, with over 25 active factories, Mauritania emerged as a leading producer of fishmeal and fish oil in Africa, according to the Coalition pour des accords de peche equitable (CAPE).

Official figures from the Mauritanian Fish Marketing Company (SMCP) confirmed that, in the first quarter of 2020 alone, nearly 33,000t of fishmeal and fish oil were exported, equivalent to about 165,000t of fish, primarily small pelagics. If production of oil and meal continued at this frenetic pace, more than 650,000t of small pelagics would have been processed into fishmeal and oil in Mauritanian factories by 2020, according to CAPE.

The demand for fishmeal, including for aquaculture production, has not only strained local fish stocks but also negatively impacted the availability and affordability of fish for Mauritanian populations. Much of the catch by these foreign vessels was destined for fishmeal factories owned by international entities that have established a significant presence in the region. Now some of those are likely to disappear, and the ones that will remain viable are likely to be the ones that include processing for human direct consumption, according to sources.

A substantial portion of Mauritania's fish production is exported to countries like Turkey and other international markets in Asia and beyond.

After signing a fisheries deal with Mauritania in 2022, the EU parliament urged the African country to put an end to the overfishing of small pelagic stocks, which had negative consequences on local food security and caused water pollution. "Small pelagic fish are processed into fishmeal and fish oil by the food processing sector instead of being used for local consumption, say MEPs. They underline that although Mauritania had committed in 2017 to gradually eliminating the production of fishmeal and fish oil by 2020, fishmeal factories have been multiplying since 2010," the EU parliament wrote in 2022.

Last year, however, Morocco was able to seize the opportunity amid the global fishmeal shortage, boosting the value of its sardine-based exports. Moroco's fishmeal producers and exporters have seen a significant increase in their exports of sardine-based fishmeal, sources at the Conxemar show in Vigo in October 2023 told *Undercurrent*.

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Taking advantage of a global shortage primarily driven by reduced supply from Peru, Moroccan companies have witnessed a surge in demand for their sardine-based fishmeal products.

"The spike in orders can be attributed to a scarcity of similar products in the international market, with Peru, the leading exporter of fishmeal, facing challenges in meeting the global demand due to various factors, including adverse weather conditions affecting their fishing industry," said an exporter based in Morocco's port city of Laayoune.

The source, who spoke anonymously, said that some Moroccan companies selling this product have been quick to fill the gap left by Peru. "We embraced this opportunity," he said.

"Additionally, prices have gone up a lot. This is awesome since we really are not able to ramp up production due to the limited availability of the resource in our waters," he also told *Undercurrent* last October.

"We are billing around 20% more than usual for sardine-based fishmeal, with China asking a lot for it too," he concluded.

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