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EC COMMISSION RECOMMENDS BAN ON
IMPORTS OF SEAL PRODUCTS

The European Communities Commission has recommended that the EC ban imports of skins from the young of certain seal species to help prevent further declines in seal populations seriously depleted by excessive commercial hunting.

The proposed ban, which would need the approval of the EC's Council of Ministers before becoming law, would take effect on March 1, 1983, the start of the 1983 seal hunting season. It would apply to young seals commonly known as "whitecoats" and "bluebacks". A provision of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade that permits nations to impose commercial restrictions for "moral reasons" would form the legal basis for such a ban.

The Commission proposed the ban in response to a resolution adopted last March by the European Parliament calling for a halt to imports of skins and other products derived from young harp or hooded seals and from other seal species whose stocks are depleted, threatened or endangered. The resolution also urged the Commission to bring pressure to bear on the government of Canada to require that more humane killing methods be employed in that country's annual seal hunt.

That resolution passed the Parliament by an overwhelming majority after receiving unprecedented public support which has since continued to grow.

Before formally proposing the ban, the Commission consulted with the governments of both Canada and Norway in an attempt to convince them to call a halt to the hunt before the beginning of the next season. At that time, the Commission requested a response from the two governments by the end of September and announced it would propose appropriate measures to the Council

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should those responses be negative. On September 22 Canada informed the Commission that it would continue to manage the seal harvest on the basis of present harvesting methods. Neither government proved prepared to make the concessions sought by the Commission.

A report on the status of harp and hooded seal populations, prepared for the Commission by the Nature Conservancy Council, concluded that there was a risk that seal populations would be endangered if hunting were to continue at present levels. The NCC urged the Commission to take whatever steps were in its power to ensure the future security of these populations. It particularly recommended a ban on trade in hooded seal products until scientific evidence showed that such a ban was no longer necessary.

Because of the deep public concern aroused by the plight of the hunted baby seals, several EC member states have adopted or are in the process of considering restrictions on trade in seal products that could cause trade distortions within the EC. Three member states, the UK, Italy and the Netherlands, have adopted measures designed to prohibit or discourage imports of baby seal skins. In France the fur industry has voluntarily adopted a policy that has effectively eliminated the use of seal skins by French furriers.

The Commission is at the same time initiating with EC member states proposals designed for the greater protection of these species within the context of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species, commonly known as the Washington Convention.
