Who does not love sardines? A great source of protein, these little fishes are tasty, easy to cook and very affordable. In fact, Filipinos from all walks of life eat sardines and it's a part of our rich food culture.

A significant increase in the productivity of commercial sardine fishing and canning had been observed, thanks to the Closed Fishing Season Policy for sardines, that translates into the general improvement of the Zamboanga City economy and therefore increase in livelihood and job opportunities for the fisher folks and their families.

**Sardine Industry In Zamboanga**

Zamboanga Peninsula is consistently producing the highest volume of sardines, contributing about 70% of the total Philippine production for the last 10 years.

The region has 26 commercial fishing companies. In a SOPHIL report, they have recorded total of 104 purse seine operations from both members and non-members.

The local canning sardines' processors scheduled the factory cleaning and maintenance during the three-month closed fishing season.

According to Dr. Mudjekeewis Santos, Scientist II of the National Fisheries Research and Development Institute, the catch yield of sardines have been recorded in other fishing grounds such as Davao Gulf, West Sulu Sea, which were previously absent for the past couple of years, most likely due to a spill-over effect.

Dr. Santos added “Anecdotal reports also indicate that municipal fishermen have started to catch bigger fishes such as tunas and mackerels "tanigue" in the coastal areas of Zamboanga Peninsula, which were also already not existent for the past years, most likely due to the availability of sardines as food.”

Government assistance includes the production and distribution of fish seeds, fishing gears and paraphernalia like gill nets and fish pots, hook and lines, non-motorized banca and marine engines to fisherfolks and their associations.

Some of the fishermen that were affected were enrolled in the 4Ps Program of the local government unit, as a safety net during the implementation period of the policy.

The Department of Labor and Employment and Technical Education Skills Development Authority also opened their livelihood training support programs to fishermen who were affected. The Commercial fishing and canning companies have likewise provided support to their fishers, by employing them in alternative work such as rubber tree planting.

Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) also provides input assistance for seaweed seedlings and seaweed farming that establishes post-harvest facilities such as smokehouses, elevated fish solar dryers.

**Policy In Focus: Where It All Started**

A few years back, fisherfolks from Zamboanga Peninsula were experiencing decline in sardines catch and the size of the fishes were smaller than usual.

Because this was becoming a problem, Raymer Cordova, Provincial Federation Fisherfolk President and Edgardo Ruiz, Provincial Agriculture and Fisheries Council chairperson recommended a policy to address the concern.

This policy recommendation calls for the management of sardines catch by imposing closed season in East Sulu Sea, Basilan Strait and Sibuguey Bay.

This policy prohibits catch
of undersized fishes, as well as commercial fishing from December 1 to March 1 of every year, which is the spawning season of sardines in the area.

This will enable the fishes to mature and spawn thereby increasing population.

According to the Department of Science and Technology Philippine Council for Agriculture, Aquatic and Natural Resources Research and Development (DOST-PCAARRD) implementation of seasonal control such as the open and closed season policies for fishing regulates the overexploitation of marine fish species and resources. It also helped authorities to ensure sustainability of the sardine population in the nearby regions and also includes other species of fishes like the red coral grouper or suno, green grouper or loba, and brown marble grouper or laping-baboy.

Later on the policy was strengthened further through the efforts of Roberto Baylosis, Executive Vice President of SOPHIL Fishing Association, Director Noel Barut, Dr. Mudjekeewis Santos and Development Institute and former BFAR-9 Director, the late Abdul Gapor Abdua. The group pushed for the implementation of the policy not just in Zamboanga, but in the whole country.

Finding this recommendation sound and doable, under the leadership of then Undersecretary Asis Perez the BAC 255 was recommended. The policy only allowed municipal fishing during the agreed closed season.

**Impact Of The Policy**

The policy increased the supply of sardines and other large pelagic fishes, such as tunas and mackerels for the local fishers that results in a better food supply and source of income in the area.

According to the latest analytic research conducted by Elsevier and latest Philippine Statistics Authority data, there was an increase in fish stock resulting to increase in landed catch of 181,918.51 metric tonnes.

Increase in the incomes of fisher folks and fishing crews of canning factories was also seen.

The study’s primary data were gathered through house to house surveys, resource person interviews and group discussions with local stakeholders.

According to Dr. Santos, there is an increase in the abundance of sardine population in the Zamboanga Sibuguey Bay.

“There were significant yearly increases in sardine catch by the commercial and municipal fishers in Zamboanga area of up to 30% starting 2013, the 3rd year of the implementation of the policy.”

Though generally effective, the policy also has a few adverse effects in the area, according to Dr. Santos.

Fishermen working as crew members in the local commercial fishing boats, are out of livelihood during the closed fishing months. The market price of sardines decreased due to the abundance of supply, but according to EVP Baylosis, the policy’s indirect effect to the local fishers is the increase of high value fishes catch yield.

This fishes such as alamahan and tuna preys on sardines which became more abundant because of the policy. He also added that the closed fishing season policy is successful, beneficial and should be continued perpetually. Due to the its positive impact, it is also imposed in the Visayan Sea and Northern Palawan.

**Future of the Policy**

According to Dr. Santos, the policy is effective in maintaining the population of sardines and in ensuring the ability of the fishes to spawn and mature. But NFRDI including BFAR and DOST-PNDARIDA and Natural Resources Research and Technology Council for Agriculture, Aquatic Science and Technology Philippine Development Institute (DOST-PCAARRD) for the implementation of the policy.

---

**DEFINITION OF TERMS**

**Pelagic Fishes** - categorized as coastal and oceanic fish, based on the depth of the water they inhabit.

Coastal pelagic fish inhabit sunlit waters up to about 655 feet deep, typically above the continental shelf. Ex: anchovies, sardines. Oceanic pelagic fish inhabit waters below the continental shelf. Ex: tuna, mackerel.

**Spawning Period** – the time of the year which the fishes spawn or lay their eggs.

** Marketable Size** – the size requirement of the fishes to be canned and sold as determined by the canning factories and market vendors. For sardines, it is between 12 to 16 cm. (4.7 – 6.3 inches)

**Sustainable Yield** - fish catch that remains stable at a certain effort.

**Catch Yield** - or production, the volume of fish caught in kilos or tonnes.

**Spill-Over Effect** - fishes that migrate outside its usual distribution area.