

Japan to Hunt Fewer Whales This Season

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TOKYO (AP) — Japan will target fewer whales when its Pacific hunt begins next week and will observe them in the Antarctic next season with the aim of resuming full-fledged commercial whaling, the fisheries minister said Friday.

The announcement underscored that Japan [hasn't abandoned its plans to continue whaling](#) [1] in both oceans for research purposes, an allowed exception to a global ban on commercial whaling. Last month, the International Court of Justice ordered Japan to suspend its Antarctic program because it was virtually commercial, not scientific as Japan had contended.

The annual spring hunt along Japan's northern coast is to begin next week, and the distant northern Pacific expedition in May, with another coastal hunt planned in the autumn.

Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries Minister Yoshimasa Hayashi said the Pacific catch target was being slashed by nearly half — to about 210 from the current 380.

"We will continue our research hunts aimed at collecting scientific data and seek to resume commercial whaling," Hayashi told reporters in a hastily called briefing. "We re-examined the content of our research programs and came up with the plans that give the maximum consideration to the ruling, and we plan to fully explain that to other countries."

Hayashi said Japan will limit next season's Antarctic program to whale observation, but plans to return to the southern seas with hunting plans under a new program for the 2015-2016 season.

During the 2013-2014 season, Japan caught 251 minke whales in the Antarctic, or just a quarter of its quota, and 246 others in the Pacific.

Japan will aim to submit new Antarctic and Pacific programs for that season on to the scientific committee of the International Whaling Commission later this year, Hayashi said. The commission has a conference scheduled in September. Its new plans will be crafted transparently with the help of scientists from in and outside Japan, Hayashi promised.

The court said Japan produced little actual research under its supposedly scientific program and failed to explain why it needed to kill so many whales in order to study them. The ruling left Japan the option of retooling its whaling program to be more scientific, though any new Antarctic plan would face intense scrutiny.

Experts say the ruling could be a convenient, face-saving solution for Japan to scale back the research whaling as it struggles with growing stockpile of whale meat and

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escalating anti-whaling protests in the Antarctic.

The research hunts started in 1987 following an international moratorium on commercial whaling. Japan finances the program partly by selling whale meat, but sales have fallen as whale meat became less popular, forcing sharp increases in government subsidies to keep the program afloat.

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