



Thursday, September 21, 2006

## **Federal vacuum beckons governors**

*The ocean – our livelihood – is at stake*

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A thousand years from now, historians may consider cooperation among nations and states as one of the key tools that averted environmental catastrophe at this critical moment in human history.

For most of human history, we have rattled around a world with vast, untapped natural resources and space for expansion. Particularly in America, where the descendants of European settlers washed westward like an unstoppable tide over the native tribes, there always was another forest, field and fishery over the horizon.

Those times are past, but in some ways we continue to cling to practices and political dividing lines that ignore how things have changed. Here on the West Coast, the federally sponsored Pacific Fishery Management Council does a comparatively decent job in overseeing commercial fish species, while in other respects the Pacific Ocean remains a no man's land, where no one is really in charge.

In the absence of federal leadership, the governors of Oregon, Washington and California said this month that they will begin working toward a shared strategy for ocean issues that know no boundaries. Although this effort is likely to be constrained by lack of money and legal jurisdiction over all but near-shore waters, it still is laudable and just possibly valuable.

California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, possibly as much from political pragmatism as from environmental idealism, recently launched state efforts to curb the emission of greenhouse gases. With the world's sixth-largest economy, even acting by itself California can make a noticeable impact on this problem. Although the Bush administration was quick to complain that Schwarzenegger was overstepping his authority, California clearly has considerable room to influence agency, corporate and individual behavior.

The same, hopefully, will be true of the three states working together on coastal and ocean issues. In some ways, there now is such a leadership vacuum that whatever they do will fill important gaps. Simply by acknowledging that the ocean consists of interconnected ecosystems that do not conform to state lines is a powerful step in the right direction.

Although it clearly would be desirable to have appropriately funded national efforts to ensure the health of our oceans, as urged by two national ocean task forces, the fact that the states are stepping up to the plate is a noteworthy silver lining. In general, government tends to be more effective the closer it is to the people and the goals of everyday citizens. If the states do a good job of obtaining citizen buy-in, much more can be achieved than might be the case if rules were dictated from Washington, D.C.

The danger of an initiative such as this is that changes in the governors may bring abandonment of programs. But here, too, if the citizens accept responsibility for the ocean, that sense of ownership should survive despite shifts in the political landscape.

The ocean is our livelihood, our neighborhood and our future. For our sake and for our children, we must understand this and act accordingly.

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