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MANAGING CALIFORNIA'S NATURAL RESOURCES

Water more precious as state grows Marine reserves: State wildlife board creates 29 refuges off Central Coast where fishing to be banned or restricted

Glen Martin, Chronicle Environment Writer
Saturday, April 14, 2007



Fishing will be banned or restricted in almost 20 percent of the Central Coast waters, under a decision Friday by a state wildlife commission. The move creates the nation's most ambitious marine reserve system.

The refuge program, which will ultimately span the entire coast, is designed to revive California's depleted near-shore fish stocks.

"With this action, California has embarked on something extraordinary," said Richard B. Rogers, president of the California Fish and Game Commission. "We've taken the first step to returning California waters to fully sustainable abundance."

Environmentalists largely hailed the decision as a landmark step to protect dwindling fish species, such as rockfish. Fishing groups, however, said the program was too restrictive and would limit what commercial fishermen could catch and what consumers would be able to buy.

The 1999 Marine Life Protection Act directed the expansion of the state's marine refuge system with the goal of enhancing marine ecosystems and restoring fisheries. The commission tentatively approved the refuges in August and agreed to implement them Friday at a meeting in Bodega Bay.

Friday's action established 29 protected marine areas along California's Central Coast, between Pigeon Point in San Mateo County and Point Conception north of Santa Barbara. The reserves cover approximately 204 square miles, representing 18 percent of Central Coast waters.

About 94 square miles will be designated as "no take" preserves, where all commercial and recreational fishing and kelp harvesting will be forbidden. Limited fishing and kelp harvesting would be permitted in the remaining reserves.

Under the 1999 act, the state will hire extra Department of Fish and Game wardens to guard the reserves. Nine new wardens will patrol the Central Coast reserves.

The commission will designate reserves for the coast from Half Moon Bay to Point Arena, excluding San Francisco Bay, by 2008. Reserves for remaining coastal state waters -- including San Francisco Bay -- will be chosen by 2011.

The designation process has been long, arduous and often acrimonious. Environmentalists, sport anglers,

commercial fishermen, spear fishers, recreational divers and kelp harvesters all jockeyed for favor with the commissioners -- and against each other.

"I think the commission took the big picture and picked an alternative that was good for the environment and good for the people of California," said Karen Garrison, the oceans program director for the Natural Resources Defense Council.

"As a diver, I can verify that California's underwater places are as spectacular as Yosemite and King's Canyon," Garrison said. "But we're playing catch-up with the ocean."

Warner Chabot, vice president of the Ocean Conservancy, said he favored more rigorous protections than those authorized by the commission.

"We think of this as a compromise of a compromise." Chabot said. "But on the whole it's fair and balanced. It allows for ample recreational and commercial fishing while establishing more protected areas to restore the ocean's biodiversity."

Fishermen were not so sanguine. A spot-prawn trapper said the decision will drive him out of business, because it prohibits prawn trapping at Soquel Canyon, a prime fishing spot in Monterey Bay. Spot prawns are one of California's most highly esteemed -- and expensive -- seafoods.

And Doug Neumann, a salmon troller from Ocean Cove (Sonoma County), described the reserve plan as extreme.

"The fishing regulations now in place are working," Neumann said, referring to limits on trawling and long lines, methods generally considered environmentally destructive.

"The fish are coming back. All this will do is concentrate people in smaller areas. It will actually make the overfishing worse," he said.

Zeke Grader, executive director of the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations, said the decision didn't address the real problem facing coastal fisheries: pollution.

"For (the reserves) to work, they have to be integrated with a strong water-quality policy," Grader said. "By themselves, the reserves will afford about as much protection to fisheries as the Maginot Line did for the French in (World War II)."

Some divers and ecotourism representatives said the program will exacerbate environmental degradation -- especially in the Monterey area.

Berkley White, a spokesman for a coalition of 20 businesses on Monterey's Cannery Row, said the reserve program will allow abalone farmers to harvest far more kelp between Monterey and Pacific Grove.

"The kelp forest is going to disappear," he said. "And that's one of the most popular kayaking and dive spots in the country. People go there to see the fish, birds and sea otters the kelp supports."

But the complaints -- for the Central Coast, at least -- are now all consigned to the past. For better or worse, the reserve program will move forward. And most of the people involved in the process think that's a good thing.

"Everybody has been saying, 'Let's take the time to get this thing right,' " said Commissioner Jim Kellogg. "I think it's as right as it's gonna get."

Online resources

For more information on the refuge program:

www.dfg.ca.gov/MRD/mlpa

www.pcffa.org

www.oceanconservancy.org

E-mail Glen Martin at glenmartin@sfgate.com.

<http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2007/04/14/BAGT9P8IGB1.DTL>

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