

Saving our oceans

A Register-Guard Editorial

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Oregon has once again joined its West Coast neighbors in an initiative that seeks to partially fill a void in national leadership on a critical environmental issue.

This time, the problem isn't global warming. It's the degradation of the ocean ecosystem from overfishing, destruction of wetlands, agricultural runoff, industrial pollution, climate change and legislation approved earlier this year by the U.S. House that would open the nation's coastlines to a new wave of oil and gas exploration.

In an agreement announced Monday, the governors of Oregon, California and Washington said they will send a joint message to Congress opposing any plans to allow oil and gas leasing, development and exploration off the West Coast. They also agreed to set goals for cleaning up coastal waters and beaches, protecting coastal habitats, enhancing sustainable economic development in coastal communities and working with their universities to develop a regional plan for coastal research.

The announcement could hardly come at a more critical time. Three years have passed since two high-profile panels - the Pew Oceans Commission and the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy - issued depressingly bleak assessments of the state of America's coastal waters.

The threat to the oceans represents one of the most urgent ecological crises of our time. Off the Oregon Coast between Florence and Lincoln City, scientists are studying a 70-mile-long "dead zone" of low-oxygen water that is suffocating marine life and may be triggered by global warming. Meanwhile, decades of overfishing and poor federal management have taken an appalling toll on fish populations.

In a move that drew little national attention, California took a major step last month that is the oceanic equivalent of the state's earlier commitment to combat global warming. The state's Fish and Game Commission approved a network of 29 marine protected areas in state-controlled waters off the state's central coast.

The designations banned fishing in 8 percent of the protected areas and restricted it in the remainder. The plan is based on scientific studies that have shown that no-fishing zones provide the best hope for recovery of depleted marine species.

Earlier this year, Gov. Ted Kulongoski proposed an even bolder plan for Oregon. The governor said he wants to convert the state's entire coastline into a national marine sanctuary. Kulongoski's plan, which would have left commercial and recreational fishing under the control of the Pacific Fishery

Management Council, would have extended state jurisdiction, which currently runs just three nautical miles from the beach, to cover the continental shelf, a distance averaging 25 miles.

Since the Republican-controlled Congress and White House are unlikely to approve such a proposal, especially in light of the current push for offshore oil and gas drilling, Kulongoski may want to follow California's lead by focusing on reserves in the near-shore ocean waters that are currently under state jurisdiction.

In joining with California and Washington to improve ocean health, Kulongoski is heeding Goal 19 of Oregon's land-use planning system. The goal requires the state "to conserve marine resources and ecological functions for the purposes of providing long-term ecological, economic and social value and benefit to future generations."

Both Congress and the White House should commit to following the West Coast's lead. The stakes are too immense to do otherwise.