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Marine reserves: Charting a course for our future

Everyone can agree our ocean is undergoing a major transformation. In the old days, we tested the limits of our ocean by applying increasingly destructive pressures. Our state corrected some of these practices after seeing the toll that unregulated human activities could take on our environment - the extinction of our Oregon sea otter, for instance. Now we're looking to the ocean to satisfy even more of our needs - wave energy, underwater fiber-optic cables, and of course fishing, for an ever-growing population. As we undertake all of these ambitious ocean projects, we must incorporate a strong ocean conservation plan to work with, not against, these economic drivers. Just as Governor Oswald West saw both an economic and quality of life advantage in protecting Oregonians' public access to beaches, Governor Kulongoski sees the creation of marine reserves - underwater parks - as vital to sustaining both our Oregon way of life and the health of our coastal economy, which contributes more than five billion dollars in personal income to our state.

We've seen how dependent our coastal economy is on the health of our oceans first hand. I think many of us can remember the rockfish closure just before Labor Day weekend in 2004. The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife said this closure was necessary so that the rockfish fishery could withstand the increased pressures during the holiday. It also sent shockwaves throughout our community. Charter boat captains, motels and restaurants called me to voice their concerns about this economic blow. If our fish populations are truly at the point where one weekend could be a make-or-break moment for them, we need to do better to ensure that our ocean resources are sustainable for the future, for the sake of our economic stability and resiliency.

Part of what makes us so vulnerable is that we haven't had a comprehensive plan to rebuild our fisheries proactively. Scientists have shown that the best way to rebuild declining fish populations is to not simply place protections on a single species, but protect everything that species relies on to survive - including forage fish and its habitat. Marine reserves are the only management tool that would achieve that. Because whole ecosystems are protected, studies of marine reserves in temperate waters like Oregon's show that fish can grow more abundant and bigger in size, which means more eggs to "reseed" other areas of the ocean.

These findings are well-known in marine science circles, but our community

needs to learn more, so we can move the conversation forward on how to best design a system to meet Oregon's needs.

Right here in Depoe Bay, the wheels are turning on marine reserve design with strong community input. Recreational and commercial fishermen have established the Near Shore Action Team (NSAT), and they're achieving a consensus for a marine reserve site they would like to nominate for the state network of marine protected areas. This kind of collaborative process is something we need to achieve up and down the coast, so this plan can move forward in a productive way.

Our commercial fishing fleet and our Department of Fish & Wildlife has been progressive and creative with the measures they've used to sustain our ocean resources, like gear modifications and new gear types. Our department is one of the best at anticipating threats and responding quickly with necessary closures and restrictions. But I see a future where instead of reacting to declines that are already happening, a smartly designed network of marine reserves helps us rebuild fish populations before declines start, to ensure that a sustainable supply of fish remains available for fishing and crabbing for generations to come.

This can be done in a way that leaves the majority of the ocean open to fishing, and with minimal economic impacts. But to make sure those goals are achieved, we must maintain an honest, open dialogue. The Governor has sent his chief of staff to listen to coastal concerns on this issue this week. Our ongoing participation in this fair and inclusive process is vital.

The health of our Oregon ocean is good, especially in comparison with other parts of the globe. Many fish stocks are showing strong signs of recovery. As a result, some are questioning the need for a system of reserves. But I think the time to act is now - to protect the gains we've already achieved today and to enhance our ocean for tomorrow.

The ocean is integral for our economic health, but it's so much more - it's part of our identity. A healthy, thriving ocean and the industries that rely on it - the commercial fleet, the whale watching tours, surf shops, bait and tackle shops, hotels, boutiques and restaurants - weave a unique coastal fabric that is part of our identity, that makes visitors come back to us year after year.

Let's keep in mind the needs of future generations of Oregonians, and move this process forward.

Bill Hall is a Lincoln County Commissioner.