

Opinion

The Register-Guard

Move forward on reserves

Decision to extend deadline is a wise move

Published: March 29, 2008 12:00AM

Given the uproar over his proposal to establish a network of marine reserves along the Oregon Coast, it would be understandable if Gov. Ted Kulongoski let the idea sink quietly beneath the waves.

Despite protests that reserves are unnecessary, would damage the coast's economy and threaten an already beleaguered fishing industry, the governor has not abandoned this important initiative. He is moving forward while attempting to defuse tensions with promises, concessions and a rigorous effort to win over skeptics in the fishing industry and coastal communities.

On Wednesday Kulongoski signed an executive order that pushes back a deadline he already has extended once for nominating areas to be declared off-limits to fishing, crabbing or any other extractive activities. Earlier he pledged that the network would consist of no more than nine reserves in the 3-mile strip that runs the 360-mile length of the state's coast.

Kulongoski is not Oregon's first governor to propose marine reserves. Nearly a decade ago, Gov. John Kitzhaber formed a task force to study the idea. But Kulongoski is the first to push the idea past the talk-and-study stage. He should keep pushing until a network of reserves are in place to replenish depleted fish populations and other marine life off the Oregon Coast.

Studies have established the effectiveness of reserves. The Partnership for Interdisciplinary Studies of Coastal Oceans recently analyzed scientific studies of 124 marine reserves around the world. The survey found more and bigger forms of marine life in reserves. Average increases of 166 percent were recorded in the number of plants and animals, while the total mass of marine life increased an average of 446 percent. Species diversity rose by 21 percent. The density of some heavily fished species increased more than 1,000 percent inside the reserves.

Unlike Washington state and California, Oregon has no marine reserves. Last year California established the largest network of reserves in the continental United States " a necklace of 29 protected areas from Santa Barbara to Santa Cruz.

Kulongoski's decision to extend the deadline was prudent, and further extensions may be necessary to ensure that the state Ocean Policy Advisory Council is adequately prepared to make its recommendations. The council's Scientific and Technical Advisory Committee recently expressed concerns about the need for additional time and resources.

The council faces a daunting assignment. Its recommendations must be based on clearly defined and broadly supported goals. Establishing such goals will require the cooperation of state and local officials, the commercial and recreational fishing industries, and an array of other interests. Only after those goals have been identified can the council's scientific and technical advisers identify the size, location and spacing of the reserves needed to meet the goals.

For scientists, that job will be complicated by the lack of adequate maps of the terrain beneath Oregon's territorial waters. Before they can identify viable reserves, scientists need to know the location of the kelp forests, rocky reefs and other features vital to fisheries. In the absence of mapping, fishermen can provide invaluable assistance in identifying what's on the ocean floor and what areas serve as fish incubators.

More information on groundfish species is also needed. So far only eight of the 43 species in territorial waters have been assessed, and only two appear to have been overfished. The council needs to know what species are in trouble so their differing ranges can be taken into consideration in determining the critically important size and spacing of reserves.

Finally, the council must fully consider the social and economic effects of reserves. If, for example, an Oregon coastal community has only one commercially viable fishing ground, then the state should locate its reserves elsewhere. Failure to adequately weigh social and economic impacts will undermine popular support for the reserves and diminish their prospects for success, especially given the state's limited enforcement capabilities.

The world's oceans are in trouble, and the waters off the Oregon Coast are no exception. Both the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy and the Pew Oceans Commission have warned that ocean ecosystems in state and federal jurisdictions are significantly degraded and have called for a massive effort, including the creation of new marine reserves, to restore them.

Kulongoski is wise to take the extra time needed to get it right. He's also correct in pressing forward in the face of opposition by the fishing industry and coastal communities, both of which should realize that a properly designed system of marine reserves can help ensure vibrant fisheries and coastal economies for generations to come.