



Sunny

High of 78 at the coast, 88 inland. B12

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COMMENTARY

Lessons in ocean protection failures

By Steve Scheiblauber

Today, Californians who are concerned about protecting our ocean will meet in Ventura as part of a yearlong process to improve the health of the ocean, biodiversity and marine ecosystems off the coast of Southern California.

The so-called Regional Stakeholder Group — made up of commercial and recreational fishermen, scientists, environmentalists and other people interested in ocean health — has been assigned the job of recommending new fishing-restricted areas, required to fulfill state law, the Marine Life Protection Act.

This group will ultimately help determine what kind of marine conservation we get. Will the new restricted areas be part of a comprehensive plan to address the most serious threats to the ocean? Will they do anything to resolve long-standing and serious water-quality problems? Or will they simply give the illusion of protection by shutting down fishing?

The way the act has already been implemented in places like Monterey illustrates important mistakes that, if recognized by the leadership and corrected, can make the Southern California effort much more effective in preserving and protecting our ocean.

We all know that people come to Monterey, and many other coastal communities, to eat fresh, locally caught seafood and to enjoy the uniqueness of the fishing culture, like Cannery Row. We have a deep heritage of commercial and recreational fishing, which supports Monterey's larger tourism industry.

Approach rejected

But the effort to carve out ocean areas for new restrictions along the Central Coast has unfortunately rejected a comprehensive approach to achieve sustainability goals. The resulting negative impact on the fishing community has made it more costly and dangerous to catch fish. And it's hurt our broader economy at a time when we can least afford it.

In 1995, there were more than 150 commercial fishing boats operating full time out of Monterey's harbor, but in the last few years, that number has decreased drastically. There are now only about 30 full-time boats and just 73 in total. And that number is expected to drop even more.

As Monterey's harbormaster, I've seen firsthand how local fishermen are dispirited — and put out of business — because the implementation process didn't value their needs or the food they provide to the public, much less their recommendations for how to achieve ocean protection as well as viable fishing communities.

Political process

It's unfortunately amounted to a political process of taking away a large percentage of the prime fishing grounds from recreational and commercial fishermen, based on the beliefs of a few, rather than a need founded in public opinion and peer-reviewed science.

Although recently improved, originally, officials didn't see value in appointing a balanced scientific team — one that reflected the diversity of all scientific disciplines and perspectives. But the imbalance favoring expansive restrictions remains intact in the guidelines for determining the size and spacing of new marine-protected areas.

And an inherent conflict of interest hasn't been recognized or addressed. Many of these same scientific team members who provide advice are also stakeholders, having a great deal to benefit for themselves and their careers by the creation of no-fishing zones near their institutions.

What's more, there's been no coordination or effort to integrate existing federal- and state-protected areas and already strict fishing regulations into the new plan.

The resulting marine protected areas' size and spacing guidelines provide few alternatives to any other stakeholders, such as fishermen. This results in redundancy, but little environmental benefit.

And that's certainly not what Californians want.

A 2007 poll for the Alliance of Communities for Sustainable Fisheries shows that two-thirds of the public support small, independent fishermen and recreational fishing activities. Californians want smart management of marine ecosystems and fish resources, not total ocean closures that simply hurt local economies without delivering real environmental benefits.

Equitable solutions needed

When asked which is the better management strategy — to set aside some areas and not let people fish in those areas, even if it means that fishing is displaced, or to manage all of the ocean for sustainable use through science-based fishing quotas — by a nearly 3-to-1 margin, Californians selected the option for sustainable use of the entire ocean. That's significant when compared with the way in which the Marine Life Protection Act has been implemented thus far.

California deserves better than this.

As the Marine Life Protection Act moves into Southern California, the implementation of this law needs to achieve a more balanced process, crafting fair, equitable solutions that preserve a balance: healthy oceans, sustainable seafood resources and economically strong coastal and harbor communities.

Otherwise, we will see a steady destruction of our ability to enjoy the ocean and put fresh local seafood on the table.

— Steve Scheiblauber is Monterey's harbormaster and has been involved in each of California's attempts to implement the Marine Life Protection Act, as well as other marine protection area planning efforts.