
Another path to healthier oceans

By Vern Goehring
September 8, 2008

Today, a blue-ribbon task force will meet in San Diego and begin a yearlong effort to determine how best to improve the health of oceans off the coast of Southern California.

While everyone shares the goal of cleaner oceans, unfortunately past efforts in other parts of the state have rejected comprehensive approaches to achieve that goal.

The task force will be preparing recommendations for marine-protected areas. But to date, rather than protecting the ocean from the full range of impacts on it, officials have singled out one thing – fishing – as the target of their regulations. As Southern California residents know, fishing is the least threat, and additional regulations would generate the least benefit; however, regulating fishing often presents the least resistance.

These piecemeal approaches certainly give the appearance of progress, but don't do the real work of identifying and equitably addressing the problems facing the Pacific.

Coastal development and the many other things that deliver pollution to our ocean from land have been largely ignored; for example, California is far behind where it should be in enforcing the Clean Water Act. Instead, the current focus is largely on closing off parts of the ocean to fishing – recreational and family run fishing businesses alike.

Sometimes this is done as a needless precaution, many times, however, as a last-ditch effort to cover up a failure to address the real problems – remember the extreme closures of Klamath River and Sacramento River salmon fishing in recent years, and the periodic closures of many Southern California beaches after virtually every heavy rain?

The task force needs to find a way to protect the ocean from all activities that “injure and damage” marine species, as the law intends. This will require bringing several local and state agencies to the table to do more than just listen. The Department of Fish and Game, regional water quality boards and others need to come forward with clear, decisive actions that will ensure marine-protected areas truly protect the ocean.

Ironically, fishing already is one of the most highly regulated activities involving the ocean. New regulations imposed recently add one thing – redundancy – but bring little environmental benefit.

What's more, communities that depend on fishing and tourism suffer under unbalanced regulations. Since the enactment of ocean closures along the central coast of California, commerce and tourism in places such as Morro Bay are down significantly.

Local families who fish for themselves or provide fresh seafood to California's citizens are not the problem and shouldn't bear the brunt of any shortsighted policies that provide an illusion of protection and let the real culprits off the hook.

Recent polls show that most people strongly agree. A 2007 poll for the Alliance of Communities for Sustainable Fisheries shows that two-thirds of Californians support small, independent fishermen and recreational fishing activities.

Californians don't think fishing is the primary threat to our oceans. Instead, they support allowing fishing throughout the state, backed up with science-based limits to ensure sustainable harvest.

Californians want smart management of marine ecosystems and fish resources, not total ocean closures that simply hurt local economies without delivering real environmental benefits.

California leaders involved in this important effort should commit themselves to evaluating all the impacts on our ocean waters and crafting fair, equitable solutions that preserve a balance: healthy oceans, sustainable seafood resources and economically strong coastal and harbor communities.

We've been given a chance to make history rather than repeat failed attempts to equitably look at the real problems facing our ocean. If we fail again, we may forever harm our ocean and all the families and communities who depend on clean ocean waters and abundant marine resources. If we succeed, we will deliver a cleaner ocean for future generations – and thriving ocean communities as well.

Goehring is manager of the California Fisheries Coalition, an association of 25 marine-related organizations whose members advocate for cleaner oceans and sustainable marine resources.



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The Malibu Times

NEWS

Does the West Coast Governors' Agreement serve all?

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Fishermen fear the plan is a threat to what they consider an already overregulated industry.

By Melonie Magruder / Special to The Malibu Times

The announcement last month that the governors of the three western coastal states--Arnold Schwarzenegger in California, Christine Gregoire in Washington and Theodore Kulongoski in Oregon--had agreed upon an "Action Plan" to protect coastal resources was met with cheers by environmental groups and anxiety by others with economic interests tied to coastal activity.

The West Coast Governors' Agreement on Ocean Health is an initiative designed to advance the goals of maintaining healthy ocean habitats. The three governors worked to prepare a draft action plan that was released in October of last year and was open to public commentary through December.

Using that input, a final Action Plan was released last month with a seven-point general agreement to focus on clean coastal waters and beaches, healthy ocean habitats, effective ecosystem-based management, reduced impacts of offshore development, increased ocean awareness in regional citizens, expanded coastal scientific research and monitoring as well as sustainable economic development of coastal communities.

Heal the Bay Spokesperson Sarah Abramson said, "We were very involved in providing input and research into shaping the Agreement and think it does a good job of outlining priorities and focusing on a larger comprehensive effort to create a greater good."

However, some fear they might not be included in that greater good. Vern Goehring is manager of the California Fisheries Coalition, an association of 26 recreational and commercial fishing businesses, whose members "advocate for cleaner oceans and sustainable marine resources," according to their Web site.

Their members contribute more than \$5.5 billion annually to the state's economy and Goehring fears that the Agreement's eco-management of coastal resources means little more than further restriction of commercial fishery operations.

"My position is that we've seen these kinds of platitudes about coastal stewardship from the governor before," Goehring said in an interview with The Malibu Times. "But in practice, it means blanket restrictions on commercial fishing licenses rather than smart management of marine ecosystems."

Goehring says the fishing industry is one of the most highly regulated industries in the state and blanket restrictions of business operators, without comprehensive consideration of their activities, only serve to hurt the coastal economies it strives to protect.

"The California Fisheries Coalition only represent small commercial fishing organizations," Goehring explained. "We're talking small family businesses who support local economies. When the Marine Life Protection Act enacted ocean closures along the central coast, commerce and tourism in places like Morro Bay went down significantly."



The crew of the F/V St. George II brail a load of sardines into the hold of the purse seine vessel. The St. George II, captained by Anthony Vuoso, has fished the waters of southern California for more than 40 years. Photo by D.B. Pleschner

The Marine Life Protection Act is a 1999 initiative designed to manage coastal resources in California, bringing together opinions from all concerned stakeholders: scientists, resource managers, experts and public members.

Goehring said the only new regulatory point in that initiative was to restrict fishing.

"There was nothing about ocean dumping or steps to alleviate pollution," Goehring maintained.

He continued, "Regulations are in place for all commercial fishing activities with regard to season, location, gear type and amounts you can take. It doesn't serve our members' purpose to wipe out fish population. So we believe careful conservation and management is the answer. Let's give science credit for adequately shaping current regulation."

Goehring's group believes that a greater threat to coastal health comes from pollution and degraded coastal regions that have seen marine populations die off, including from "red bloom," the algae that proliferates at watershed runoffs loaded with fertilizers.

This view is supported by studies from Heal the Bay and other coastal management organizations.

"We urge the governors to focus on marine debris and water quality," Abramson said.

Brian Baird, assistant secretary for oceans and coastal policies in the Governor's office, confirmed that primary strategies in the Agreement address marine habitats, problems with eroding beaches and water quality.

"We have the resources and political will to make significant ecological change that will affect the entire west coast," Baird said. "Proper resource stewardship is important, but we are identifying 26 different actions in our Plan."

Baird said the Action Plan's focus will not be to restrict fishing, but to address problems like climate change and rising sea levels, ocean pollution from runoff and elimination of invasive plant species on the coast.

"We're working with special interest groups and all stakeholders, like Heal the Bay, to put our management teams together," Baird said. "We absolutely encourage coordination with fisheries."

Goehring said his coalition has not been approached for input since the Governors' announcement was released.

"We work with the NOAA (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration) to make sure that our coasts don't suffer over fishing," Goehring said. "Our experience has been that, when we provide public commentary and participate in MLPA coordination, none of our major issues are addressed. But any effort to protect the vibrancy of our coastal ecosystems must carry the support of the people whose livelihoods depend on the ocean."

The West Coast Governors Action Plan task force is currently implementing defined strategies and expects to have a progress report within eighteen months.

More information can be obtained by visiting the Governors' Agreement website: westcoastoceans.gov

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Ocean regulations too often focus on fishing

By Vern Goehring
Tuesday, August 12, 2008

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger recently joined the governors of Oregon and Washington to announce ambitious goals to safeguard critical marine resources along the West Coast.

Among other things, the plan calls for cleaning up coastal waters, restoring fisheries, combating climate change, reducing the impacts of offshore development and fostering economic development in coastal communities.

These are all laudable ambitions that, if done correctly, can make a real difference to protect the Pacific Ocean off these state's coasts and sustain marine resources.

But protecting these important resources will take more than an announcement from three governors. We've heard these bold statements and goals before, but the follow-through has always fallen short. Rather than looking at the full range of impacts on the ocean, officials have singled out one thing or another in adopting new, narrow regulations. Usually, it's the thing of least benefit and least resistance.

These piecemeal approaches certainly give the appearance of progress, but don't do the real work of identifying and equitably addressing the problems facing the Pacific.

Coastal development and the many other things that deliver pollution to our ocean from land have been largely ignored; for example, California is far behind where it should be in enforcing the Clean Water Act. Instead, the focus has largely been on closing off parts of the ocean to fishing — recreational and family-run fishing businesses alike.

Sometimes this is done as a needless precaution, many times, however, as a last-ditch effort to cover up a failure to address the real problems — remember the extreme closures of Klamath River and Sacramento River salmon fishing in recent years.

Ironically, fishing already is one of the most highly regulated activities involving the ocean. New regulations imposed recently add one thing — redundancy — but bring little environmental benefit. People who spend every day on the ocean waters and who study and know our oceans find their input rejected out of hand by decision-makers with little real world experience.

What's more, communities that depend on fishing and tourism suffer under unbalanced regulations. Since the enactment of ocean closures along the central coast of California, commerce and tourism in places like Morro Bay are down significantly.

Local families who fish for themselves or to provide fresh seafood to California's citizens are not the problem and shouldn't bear the brunt of any shortsighted policies that provide an illusion of protection and let the real culprits off the hook. The vibrancy of our coastal harbor and beach communities and thousands of family jobs depend on a balanced approach and timely protections.

Recent polls show that most people strongly agree.

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Californians want smart management of marine ecosystems and fish resources, not total ocean closures that simply hurt local economies without delivering real environmental benefits.

The three governors' ocean announcement can be a new beginning for our ocean waters and the communities that depend on clean oceans and clean beaches.

California leaders involved in this important effort should commit themselves to evaluating all the impacts on our ocean waters and crafting fair, equitable solutions that preserve a balance: healthy oceans, sustainable seafood resources and economically strong coastal and harbor communities.

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— Vern Goehring is manager of the California Fisheries Coalition, an association of 26 marine-related organizations whose members advocate for cleaner oceans and sustainable marine resources, and contribute more than \$5.5 billion annually to the state's economy. The coalition's Web site is <http://www.cafisheriescoalition.org>.



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California needs a scientific plan for ocean protection

By **VERN GOEHRING**

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