

Fishing limits revisited with five proposals

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The rocky headlands of northern Santa Barbara County -- Point Arguello, Purisima Point and Point Sal, wild continental frontiers teeming with sea birds, sea lions, shrimp and sole -- are the focus of renewed efforts to limit fishing off California.

At a meeting in San Jose on Friday, a panel of 17 marine scientists appointed by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger looked at five competing plans for establishing a network of no-fishing and limited-fishing zones in state waters from Nuevo, a point north of Monterey, to Point Conception. The scientists will present their evaluation to a gubernatorial task force on Jan. 31 in San Luis Obispo. By law, the state Fish and Game Commission is required to establish a system of marine reserves, marine parks and marine conservation areas along the coast of California by 2011. The Central Coast plan will be the first to go to a vote by the commission, possibly in November.

"California has the opportunity here to establish something that is really a model for the world," said Steve Gaines, a UCSB marine biologist on the scientists' panel. "There's still a lot of work to be done in terms of choosing, but the process we've set up this time is working really well."

The state Marine Life Protection Act, approved in 1999, was designed to protect the wild places along the coast for future generations. It recognizes that pollution, development and overfishing have changed and degraded the marine environment, and that seabirds, dolphins, sea lions and whales depend on an abundant supply of fish for their survival.

The latest plans for reserves along the Central Coast mark the third time that the state Department of Fish and Game has made a stab at drawing up a network of marine protected areas in state waters, extending three miles from shore. Earlier attempts fizzled amid controversy and a lack of funding. To date, the only major no-fishing zones off California are around the northern Channel Islands.

In addition to marine scientists, the participants in the Central Coast debate include commercial fishermen, spear fishermen, anglers, environmentalists, recreational divers, underwater photographers and harbormasters. So far, they say, the talks have been cordial, with none of the acrimony that engulfed the Channel Islands workshops in Santa Barbara three years ago.

"The Central Coast group often had disagreements, but everyone was very polite and civil and respectful, and some good proposals came out of it," said David Pritchett, a Santa Barbara consulting ecologist on steelhead and wetland restoration. "It was very well organized and mediated."

But big differences remain. In a proposal that state officials say does not meet their criteria, a Cambria-based nonprofit group, Helping Our Peninsula's Environment, has proposed placing most of the Central Coast waters in a no-fishing zone, including waters off Vandenberg Air Force Base. The group argues that "all occupied sea otter habitat" should be protected, ensuring that the kelp beds where the animals forage for fish and hide from predators will not be harvested.

At the other end of the spectrum, an alliance of commercial and recreational fishing groups and harbormasters has proposed placing less than 5 percent of coastal waters in no-fishing zones. Off Vandenberg, the fishermen want essentially to maintain the status quo. Fishing is already largely banned for security reasons in a 10-mile-long "no stopping" zone north of Point Arguello.

Vandenberg officials did not respond last week to a reporter's requests for comment on the new proposals. But Jim Martin, West Coast regional director of the Recreational Fishing Alliance, a national nonprofit group, said environmentalists were going too far. Fishermen are hemmed in as it is by new seasonal limits and restrictions on the number of fish they can catch, Mr. Martin said. The closure of

vast fishing grounds for rockfish in federal waters off California has affected them, too, he said.

"The pendulum has swung too much to the protectionist side," Mr. Martin said. "Everybody on the environmentalist side wants to close as much rocky bottom as possible. We'd like to keep it open because that's where we fish for rockfish and lingcod."

In the months ahead, the battle will likely be waged over the rugged coastal points, prized by fishermen and conservationists alike, where currents and winds get pushed offshore and cold, nutrient-rich waters well up from the ocean depths. In the lee of these points, fish larvae whirl around in large eddies, staying in one place rather than floating down the coast. "A lot of the areas that are good for diversity are also great areas for fishing," said Neil Guglielmo, a Santa Barbara squid fisherman and a director of the California Wetfish Producers Association.

"The areas environmentalists like the most are where we'd lose the most."

Squid fishermen, lobstermen and trawlers lost good fishing ground when the Channel Islands reserves were created, and many of them moved north of Point Conception, Mr. Guglielmo said.

"The fact that we're having a great squid season this year kind of softens the blow, but we're giving up more area all the time," he said.

The scientists evaluating the Central Coast proposals are recommending that the state establish a marine reserve, park or conservation area every 30 to 60 miles along the coast of California, each extending about 12 miles along the shore for maximum protection. In the best of scenarios, they say, that means preserving about 33 percent of all marine habitats.

Under the law, marine reserves are places where all fishing is banned. In marine parks, only recreational fishing is allowed; and in marine conservation areas, selective bans apply for certain species or locations.

The Natural Resources Defense Council, a national nonprofit conservationist group, has suggested creating no-fishing zones at Point Sal, Purisima Point and Point Arguello. Overall, the council wants to ban fishing in 18 percent of coastal waters between Monterey and Point Conception.

Seeking a middle ground, a self-styled "hybrid group" led by the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary proposes setting aside a total of 9 percent of coastal waters in no-fishing zones. The sanctuary's plan would limit fishing at Point Arguello but leave Point Sal and Purisima Point open to fishing.

The Otter Project and Ocean Conservancy, two other environmentalist groups, are seeking a compromise with a proposal that bans fishing in 14 percent of coastal waters. They would leave Point Sal open to accommodate fishermen from Morro Bay. But they're asking for a marine reserve and marine park around Purisima Point, and a reserve north of Point Conception.

"I acknowledge that it impacts fishermen, but it's not about them," said Steve Shimek, executive director of The Otter Project. "It's about people's kids. The creation of Yellowstone Park was not about loggers and hunters. Shouldn't we set aside some quality spots now, purely for the sake of our natural heritage?"