

Compromise Central Coast marine reserve plan advances

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A recommendation for marine reserves along the Central Coast, including two no-fishing zones off Vandenberg Air Force Base, has been forwarded to the state Department of Fish and Game by an advisory task force.

The eight-member panel of gubernatorial appointees voted 3-2 in Monterey last week, with three members absent, to endorse a compromise between two plans developed by fishermen and environmentalists.

"It doesn't leave the legacy that that we hope this process creates for future generations of Californians," said Steve Shimek, a spokesman for the Otter Project, a nonprofit group. "It does not fulfill the expectations of the people of California."

The recommendation comes after 18 months of meetings and discussions among Central Coast fishermen, environmentalists, harbor masters, business owners, government officials and scientists. It would protect 199 square miles of marine habitat in 31 separate reserves, up from 43 square miles in 13 areas now.

The recommendation has been forwarded, along with the competing plans, to the state Department of Fish and Game for further changes. By early 2007, the state Fish and Game Commission is expected to hold public hearings and make a final decision.

"The task force was trying to maintain the biological value of the network while trying to reduce some of the impacts to fisheries," John Ugoretz, a Fish and Game spokesman, said last week. "They tried to maintain representations of specific key habitats such as rock reef and kelp forest."

By law, Fish and Game has until 2011 to establish a network of zones off the coast where fishing is limited or banned outright. The Central Coast plan, which extends from Ano Nuevo, a point north of Monterey, to Point Conception, is the first in line. The current recommendation includes no-fishing zones south of Purisima Point and around Point Arguello.

A February 2006 poll by the Public Policy Institute of California shows that 71 percent of state residents favor protecting between 10 percent and 20 percent of state waters from fishing.

The task force recommendation would protect 17 percent of state waters along the Central Coast, compared to 19 percent and 15 percent proposed respectively by the environmentalists and fishermen.

The size of the competing proposals may be similar, but the level of protection is very different. The fishermen are proposing to protect only 5 percent in no-fishing zones, compared to 13 percent in the environmentalists' plan.

John Wilson, a Santa Barbara lobsterman, wonders why it's necessary to create a no-fishing zone at Arguello, where the wind and waves "are ferocious, to put it mildly."

"Most guys stay below Gaviota, working the coast," Mr. Wilson said. "I use the area only two months out of the year, and in the 20 years I've been going up there, I've never seen a charter boat, a fishing boat, an environmental boat -- nobody. The place is teeming with life, but no one wants to take the risk."

Eric Endersby, a spearfisherman from Morro Bay and a member of the Recreational Fishing Alliance, a national nonprofit group, said anglers would be hit hard by the plan at Purisima because the best reef for fishing is to the south of the point.

"From a recreational standpoint, Purisima's a big blow," Mr. Endersby said. "And taking both of these points pretty much wipes out that whole zone."

But Mr. Shimek believes the recommendation for Point Arguello doesn't go far enough. The Otter Project, The Ocean Conservancy and 12 other groups have proposed extending this reserve south and east to protect the fish larvae that whirl around in the lee of the point.

"The water shoots off here and bathes the Channel Islands," Mr. Shimek said. "If you do not do a good job at Point Arguello, you are bankrupting the Channel Islands."

At the same time, environmentalists endorse the plan for Purisima.

"The task force did a thoughtful job," said Karen Garrison, a spokeswoman for the Natural Resources Defense Council, a national nonprofit organization. "It's a first step. This is a rare chance to create the ocean equivalent of Yosemite."