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State Creates Marine Havens

The protected areas will either ban or severely limit fishing in 18% of Central Coast waters. Other reserves are likely for the rest of the coast.

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MONTEREY — The California Fish and Game Commission on Tuesday banned or severely restricted fishing across nearly 18% of the waters off Central California, beginning to roll out the nation's first network of marine reserves next to a heavily populated coastline.

The commissioners settled on a network of 29 marine protected areas, stretching from Santa Barbara to Santa Cruz counties, that collectively cover about 200 square miles of state waters. About half are reserves that forbid any fishing; the other protected areas ban commercial fishing or impose other restrictions. Some of the areas are off Point Sur along the Big Sur coast, Año Nuevo in northern Santa Cruz County, Piedras Blancas near San Simeon and Vandenberg Air Force Base near Lompoc.

This set of reserves, more than six years in the making, is expected to be a model as additional reserves are created along the entire California coast to help depleted fish populations rebound.

"This is a landmark day, an historic day in California," said Commissioner Cindy Gustafson of Tahoe City. "We need to take great pride in our efforts to protect the coast of California."

Although the Legislature passed a law in 1999 calling for a statewide network of reserves, the plans have been stalled for years by budget cuts, staffing shortages and ferocious opposition from commercial and recreational fishermen who argued that the closures would imperil their livelihoods or pastimes.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, with funding from private conservation foundations, revived the process by focusing first on the Central Coast before considering reserves along four other sections of the state's 1,100-mile coastline.

"Today's milestone makes California a national leader in oceans management and is proof of what can be done when all those involved — the fishing industry, environmentalists and others — work together," Schwarzenegger said in a statement.

Southern California waters, from Point Conception in western Santa Barbara County to the Mexican border, will be the next battleground in this innovative approach to ocean management.

Marine reserves represent the most restrictive effort to revive plummeting fish stocks, some of which, experts say, have fallen by as much as 95% in recent decades. Regulations that limit the number of various types of fish that can be caught have failed to stave off the decline marine scientists fear could lead to a collapse of marine life. The reserves, by making all fishing off-limits, are designed to protect every marine creature in them — from the biggest bass to the smallest snail — and their oceanic habitat.

In recent months and years, marine reserves have been set up around the Channel Islands off Ventura and Santa Barbara counties, some remote islands of the Florida Keys and the northwest Hawaiian Islands.

Tuesday's unanimous vote by the five-member commission is the first attempt to set up such a network of reserves in near-shore waters along the continental United States. It means closures next to urban

centers with harbors and many fishermen who depend on these waters to make a living or for recreation.

Schwarzenegger, who has been courting conservation groups as part of his bid for reelection, has pushed for full implementation of the state's Marine Life Protection Act of 1999, which sets up the mechanism to establish the statewide reserve network.

The reserves are designed to provide sanctuary for rockfish and halibut, lobster, abalone and shellfish that remain in the same area as opposed to albacore tuna, salmon, sardines and other pelagic fish that swim great distances in the ocean. The protected areas are also expected to benefit the endangered sea otter and other imperiled marine mammals by increasing available food.

Most of the reserves also offer protection for undersea habitat, including kelp forests, rocky reefs, sandy seafloors and deep ocean canyons, such as those in Monterey Bay. For the most part, these areas will be marked off by straight lines on nautical maps. Tuesday's vote came after six hours of impassioned testimony from fishermen who said they would be put out of business, from scuba divers who complained about the dramatic loss of fish to photograph, and conservationists who insisted that the reserves were the only way to save the remnants of formerly robust fish populations off the coast.

Fred Keeley, a former Democratic assemblyman who represented the Santa Cruz area and a co-author of the 1999 law, asked the commissioners to adopt the strongest possible protections and relax them at a later date, if needed.

"It took a long time for the oceans to get in this perilous condition," Keeley told the commissioners. "It's going to take a long time for them to heal."

After years of resisting the plan, fishermen at the meeting appeared largely resigned to its inevitability. Instead of the boisterous jeering and booing that have characterized past meetings on the issue, commercial and recreational fishermen joined forces to recommend their own plan with minimal closures.

Zeke Grader, executive director of the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations, noted that the areas where fishing will be banned will still be vulnerable to another major assault on coastal marine life around the world: coastal pollution.

He urged the commissioners to coordinate with state water officials to clamp down on urban and farm runoff as well as sewage discharges that force-feed the oceans toxic chemicals and nutrients that stimulate growth of harmful algae.

"You can have all of the no-fishing zones you want, but we are going to end up with [low-oxygen] dead zones or places that are highly toxic to fish," Grader said.

Not all recreational fishermen opposed the closures.

The Cambria Fishing Club pushed to close waters just south of town. "We hope that's a fish factory that will kick out fish for us to catch," said Jim Webb, the club's president. "We think it's a great idea to create an opportunity to fish forever."

Only about 1% of the world's oceans are off limits to fishing. But marine reserves have been popping up all over the world as scientists, regulators — and some fishermen — have recognized that traditional catch limits have failed to halt steady declines of fish. More than two-thirds of commercially important fish are fully exploited or in steep decline.

President Bush in June created the Northwest Hawaiian Islands National Monument. The largest marine reserve in the world, it is a strip about 100 miles wide and 1,200 miles long.

Steve Palumbi, a Stanford marine scientist, said California's latest reserve system is a smart approach

because it would provide havens for fish to grow older. These older, larger fish can produce many more eggs than their smaller counterparts and, thus, do more to help restock areas that have suffered from excessive fishing.

Palumbi said the new network of reserves should act like a "safety net" to protect remnant fish populations against catastrophic collapse. "If we ever take a deep fall into that net, we have to make sure it doesn't break."