

Fishermen contest plans for Calif. ocean reserves

October 22 2009, By JOHN ANTCZAK , Associated Press Writer

(AP) -- There's nothing pacific about the ocean off Southern California these days. A battle over how to establish marine reserves along the coast has roiled the waters with the competing interests of environmentalists, fishermen and seaside businesses.

The fight was coming slowly to a head Thursday as a panel elicited final information before making a recommendation to the California [Fish](#) and Game Commission on one of three hotly debated plans for a Marine Protected Area in the Southern California Bight.

Stretching from Point Conception northwest of Los Angeles to the Mexican border, the 250-mile-long arc of alternately scenic and heavily urbanized coast embraces islands and reefs in waters prized for fishing, recreation, conservation and research.

Panel chairwoman Catherine Reheis-Boyd said it would be a tough decision.

"We know what the law says but we also understand the human side of this," she said.

Environmentalists put forward the most restrictive plan while the [fishing industry](#) reluctantly backed a proposal it viewed as moderating economic impacts. A third plan was considered middle-of-the-road.

Hundreds of people with a stake in the decision packed lengthy meetings

leading up to the decision, which is likely to be substantially affirmed when it goes to the commission in December.

Some feared extensive bans on fishing with serious financial consequences for commercial and sport fishing operators, harbor businesses and even tourism.

Environmentalists pushed for stringent protections to prevent the decline of hard-pressed species and argued that the concept of Marine Protected Areas has been successful elsewhere in the world, ultimately benefiting fishing.

Discussions elicited by the panel were highly detailed: Comments on the size and shape of protection areas on just one small stretch of coast elicited concerns about kelp, abalone, bass, a company's water intake pipe and Native American heritage sites.

Differences in the plans outwardly appeared small, but a fishing industry representative said in an interview that some locations are so significant that putting them off limits would have a huge impact.

"What most people don't stop to think is that fish don't live and spread themselves evenly in the ocean, they congregate in choice areas," said Vern Goehring, manager of the California Fisheries Coalition, an association of 27 commercial and recreational fishing organizations.

Kaitlin Gaffney, Pacific ecosystem protection director for Ocean Conservancy, said in an interview that the environmentalists' proposal was "efficient," protecting exactly the habitat that needs to be protected while leaving open areas for consumptive uses.

"It's a slam dunk on the science," she said.

The controversy stems from the state's 1999 Marine Life Protection Act, which found that existing protected areas had been established on a piecemeal basis and without sound scientific guidelines.

California's 1,100-mile coast was divided into five regions for re-evaluation and new Marine Protected Areas have so far been established in two of them, the central and north-central coasts.

For Southern California, three work groups created plans for a checkerboard of locations in state waters - three miles out but including islands - to protect marine life and habitat with a range of restrictions on use. Individual sites will receive various types of designation such as state marine reserve or marine conservation area.

The California Fisheries Coalition, which claims its members have a \$5.5 billion impact on the state's economy, objected to the process as focusing too much on fishing and not on other things that impact the ocean, such as coastal development, water pollution and shipping.

"The way this process is being implemented the last five years is it only considers one variable affecting the ocean, and that's fishing," Goehring said.

"What we've been arguing is that the enhanced protections or regulations need to be allocated according to the degree of threat and the degree of impact," he said.

Goehring said all the proposals would have huge direct impact on fishing operators that would spread to shore-based businesses.

The coalition, however, backed one that sought "to make it so that no one fish, no one fishery, no one community or no one business takes an overwhelming hit."

Gaffney said the Marine Life Protection Act is a broad ecosystem protection law.

"I don't think it's really sort of a site-by-site trade-off - a fish here for a business. It's a much broader question about how do you do the best job of conservation for Southern California," she said.

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