

Alliance of Communities for Sustainable Fisheries

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State's Marine Protected Areas

Not A Prescription for Ocean Health

On August 15th the California Fish and Game Commission considered several “Packages” of networks of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) along the Central Coast. MPAs are areas where some or all fishing is prohibited. This is part of the implementation of the Marine Life Protection Act (MLPA). The network they adopted, mostly on 3-2 votes, has fatal flaws. This MPA network will not assure ocean health, does not utilize the best science, ignores key stakeholder advice, will cause both environmental and needless economic harm, and exceeds the requirements of the law.

Fishermen support the MLPA's implementation and participated in this process in a constructive manner. Our knowledge of the ocean tells us that there is a place for MPAs as a tool for conservation. However, like a medicine, they must be used for the right “illness” and in the right amount. Also like medicine, misapplication of MPAs can have either no benefit to the environment, or cause harm.

The California Fisheries Coalition's (CFC) knowledge of the ocean caused us to seriously question some of the claims of the benefits of MPAs, and the science advice that the State received from a select group of scientists. As a result, we commissioned three world-renowned fishery biologists to review the scientific basis for the use of MPAs in this process.

Their report illustrates that MPAs can benefit some sedentary nearshore species, but most species found in California are far too mobile to be protected in a discrete MPA area. Further, modern fishing rules have become highly precautionary. The use of “quotas” – scientifically determined limits on the amount of fish that can be caught – have become very conservative. Since quotas are used for all of the large biomass species, including rockfish, new MPAs will not change the amount of fish being caught. It will change where they are caught, and how much effort, expense, and danger is involved in catching them. This means that for many of the MPAs created by the State, they will fail to meet the ecosystem goals of the MLPA, and in the opinion of the three scientists, will “create only the illusion of protection”.

The result will not be a healthier ocean, but the concentration of fishing in other less productive areas. The whole ocean ecosystem needs to be cared for, not just MPAs.

The fishermen's MPA Plan is the only recommendation that takes a balanced view of all the rules and tools available to provide for true ocean health. The CFC tailored a highly conservationist plan, which coordinated existing fishery management measures with the use of MPAs in certain areas, and for species, where it makes ecosystem sense: the right medicine for the right illness. Our plan satisfies ALL of the goals and requirements of the MLPA.

We tried to get the State to deal with water quality, but the MLPA process was to be all about the removal of fishermen from the water, even though the National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA) testified that overfishing is no longer a problem.

Politically, it appears that our MPA/Ocean Health Plan never had a chance. We have been largely treated like our efforts to provide fresh, sustainable seafood for an eager public are evil. The truth is, the livelihoods of generations of California fishing families depend on a healthy ocean.

We accepted Leon Panetta's challenge to be part of the solution. However, it appears that the Fish and Game Commission was pressured to adopt a network of MPAs that takes away the most productive fishing areas. This will put many local fishing families out of business, with community/tourism impacts. The political pressure was so blatant that Michael Flores, President of the Fish and Game Commission, told National Public Radio that "the Governor's re-election bid seems to have taken center stage over implementing the best policy for fishermen and the coast."

The Monterey and the Central Coast fishing industry is on the verge of a needless collapse, in part due to large environmental organizations identifying some of the most productive fishing areas and demanding that they become MPAs. This is what happened in the MLPA process, and it has now become a gubernatorial campaign issue. We believe that this tactic abuses the positive medicine that MPAs can be and abuses the law.

We urge the big environmental organizations to think about this issue a little harder, and hope that the Commission and the Governor will not cause needless environmental and economic harm. Let's listen to our doctors and work together to prescribe the right doses of the right medicines to improve the health of our oceans.

For more information about the CFC's scientific review visit www.cafisheriescoalition.org.