

For Immediate Release: Aug. 5, 2009

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California expands underwater state parks system

State adopts science-based compromise plan for ocean health

SACRAMENTO, Calif. -- Ocean advocates today praised the California Fish & Game Commission for approving a plan to protect ocean habitats between Santa Cruz and Mendocino County. The Commission voted to adopt a compromise plan that was developed during two years of public discussion, scientific study and participation by various parties with an interest in ocean protection.

Details of the plan:

- Creates 22 marine protected areas (MPAs)
- Fully protects about 86 square miles of north central coast ocean waters
- Leaves almost 90 percent of the coast open to fishing
- Leaves all of the ocean open to diving, surfing, kayaking and other recreational uses

At the hearing, marine scientists, conservationists, divers and surfers cited a global body of evidence about the crisis affecting California's oceans, with some fish species declining 90 percent. Witnesses also noted that traditional fisheries regulations and conservation tools like marine protected areas must be used together to protect sea life and habitats.

"A healthy ocean contributes to our economy, environment and way of life," said Samantha Murray of the Ocean Conservancy, a key architect of the plan. "With the help of state and federal agencies, as well as private support, Californians can be proud that we're on the path toward more sustainable seas."

A partnership of private funders and government agencies will contribute to enforcement, education and outreach efforts for these new underwater parks.

"We all worked really hard to create this plan," said Fred Smith of the Environmental Action Committee of West Marin, a member of the stakeholder advisory group. "People may look back at this time, and think we were crazy for thinking protecting 10 percent of our ocean was too much."

The new North Central Coast marine protected areas—which will go into effect in February 2010--will protect the waters around the Farallon Islands, Point Reyes Headlands and Stewarts Point.

"California is a leader in creating the nation's first statewide network of marine protected areas," said Karen Garrison of the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), and a member of the stakeholder advisory group. "Like national parks on land, these areas are the Yosemites of the sea, places where wildlife can thrive."

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