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Ocean Task Force Delays Decision on South Coast Marine Protected Area Plan

Long Beach, Cal. –The Marine Life Protection Act Blue Ribbon Task Force, a governor-appointed advisory group, this week reviewed three marine protected area plans for coastal waters between Point Conception and the border with Mexico. After three days of meetings, and six hours of public testimony, the Task Force decided to put off recommending a preferred plan, scheduling a follow up meeting for November 10 in Los Angeles. The three plans will undergo further scientific analysis before the Task Force reconvenes.

The three plans under consideration were developed by local stakeholders after a year of study and negotiations. The Conservation Plan, or Proposal 3, would protect high quality marine habitat for maximum conservation benefits. The Fishermen’s Plan, or Proposal 2, would provide minimal protection, and the Middle Ground Plan, or Proposal 1, is a compromise between the two.

A review by the Science Advisory Team shows that the Conservation Plan would do the best job of restoring sea life and habitats, providing the most ecological and economic benefits in the long run while leaving nearly 90 percent of coastal waters open for fishing.

“Coastal tourism and recreation drive the majority of jobs and revenue in southern California’s ocean economy,” said Greg Helms of Ocean Conservancy. “We hope, after reflection, the Blue Ribbon Task Force will recommend a strong marine protected area plan that will pay big dividends in the future in the form of more and bigger fish and enhanced recreation opportunities.”

The debate at this week’s meeting centered on a few ecological hot spots that are vital for the overall health of southern California’s ocean: Naples Reef, the Palos Verdes Peninsula, Point Dume, Laguna, and La Jolla.

“The value of Los Angeles County’s fisheries has dropped by half since 1990,” said Sarah Sikich of Heal the Bay. “If we don’t protect the key breeding and feeding grounds at Rocky Point and Point Dume, the entire area could see further declines. The real cost is from inaction.”

The marine protected area plans were developed with extensive input from local communities. Each plan was evaluated for potential social and economic impacts, as well as ecological benefits. Economic modeling suggests that all of the plans under consideration would result in less than a 10 percent reduction in current fish landings for commercial and recreational fisheries in southern California.

Two recent studies have shown that non-consumptive recreation—which includes beach walking, SCUBA diving, wildlife watching, surfing, swimming, and other activities that do not involve the removal of plants or animals—drive most of the jobs and revenue in southern California’s ocean economy.¹ A strong marine protected area network will not only protect the resources that drive coastal tourism and recreation, it will also create a new set of attractions for area visitors--La Jolla Underwater Park is already a popular destination.

“Studies have shown over 90 percent of visits to our coast are non-consumptive,” said Kate Hanley of San Diego Coastkeeper. “Many divers, surfers, swimmers, and birders came to this week’s Blue Ribbon Task Force meeting to support the protection of their favorite ocean places. I’d encourage them to continue working—the Marine Life Protection Act is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to leave a legacy of healthy oceans, and we have to get it right.”

The Marine Life Protection Act was designed to ensure the long-term health and productivity of California’s ocean. Go to www.caloceans.org or www.dfg.ca.gov/mlpa for more information.

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¹ The California Coast Online Survey: Southern California Module. Report to the Santa Monica Bay Restoration Foundation by The Coastal Ocean Values Center and NaturalEquity, August 2009; and State of the U.S. Ocean and Coastal Economies, by National Ocean Economics Program, July 2009.