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CALIFORNIA FISH & GAME COMMISSION ADOPTS FINAL MARINE PROTECTED AREA PLAN FOR CENTRAL COAST

First phase of statewide network of MPAs is a landmark achievement seven years in the making.

BODEGA BAY— Today the California Fish & Game Commission adopted a landmark plan for marine protected areas to protect the scenic coastline and rich marine habitat of the Central Coast. The Commission heard final public testimony on three marine protected area plan alternatives, and voted to adopt a final plan, the Commission’s “Preferred Alternative,” which was hailed by conservationists as a visionary step for restoring marine habitat and bringing back abundant fish. This makes California the first state in the U.S. to undertake such a large, comprehensive conservation plan to restore its coastal waters.

“Because of this plan, we now have a chance to protect and restore what many coastal areas have lost forever—functioning and sustainable ecosystems,” said Steve Shimek, of The Otter Project. “MPAs won’t solve every problem that is facing our ocean, but they’re an absolutely critical tool that will help ensure that our unique wildlife like the California sea otter return to healthy numbers once more.”

The plan is the result of thousands of hours of work volunteered by marine scientists, fishermen, recreation interests, conservationists and others and the culmination of seven years of work since the passage of the Marine Life Protection Act in 1999, which requires such a network of marine protected areas along the entire California coast. The Central Coast plan designates 29 offshore areas for protection from Half Moon Bay to Point Conception, and is expected to go into effect later this year. A total of 18% of the state’s coastal waters off California’s central coast will be covered by some type of protected area, leaving more than 80% of the area available for fishing. Of the overall area of more than 1150 square miles, 8% will be fully protected marine reserves, and the rest will allow limited types of sport and commercial fishing.

“The Commission’s vote represents a balanced compromise, using high quality science to protect some of the central coast’s richest sites, our underwater Yosemites. By investing in the ocean now, we can support fishing in the future,” said Kate Wing, a policy analyst with the Natural Resources Defense Council.

California’s commercial fishing fleet is landing half the amount of fish it caught in 1990 and the average size of many of those fish is smaller. Studies show that fish within marine reserves are allowed to grow older and bigger, producing up to 200 times as many young. The Central Coast MPA plan encompasses some of the most well-known areas of the California coast—from Big Sur to the elephant seal rookeries at Point Año Nuevo to Vandenberg Air Force Base near Point Conception. The plan also expands protection for Point Lobos, one of the state’s few existing

reserves, where thousands of divers visit each year to experience the vibrant wildlife of a healthy ecosystem.

This landmark decision was made possible by the commitment of the Schwarzenegger administration to an innovative public/private partnership. A high level group of policy advisors, called the Blue Ribbon Task Force, oversaw a process involving expert scientists and a group of local citizens including divers, business owners, fishermen, and conservationists. Through that process, the Task Force considered countless hours of public input, scientific review and economic information to develop a balanced package of MPAs, which they then passed on to the Fish and Game Commission. The California Fish & Game Commission unanimously agreed to consider this preferred alternative last August, and voted it into law today.

“This decision provides a legacy of ocean protection for all Californians,” said Kaitilin Gaffney of the Ocean Conservancy and a member of the Central Coast Regional Stakeholder Group. “We all have a stake in a healthy ocean. Today’s vote is a landmark conservation decision and the beginning of statewide network of marine protected areas that gets us all one step closer to realizing our shared goal of healthy marine habitat and abundant fish.”

A survey conducted by the Public Policy Institute of California in 2006 found that three out of four Californians support the creation of new marine protected areas.

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