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Compromise proposal for ocean protection urged by Governor's Task Force

SAN RAFAEL, Cal. – New protections for California's northern coast between Santa Cruz and Mendocino County, were recommended today after more than a year of public discussion and debate. Governor Schwarzenegger's Marine Life Protection Act Blue Ribbon Task Force proposed creating 18 MPAs, fully protecting 80 square miles (11%) of North Central Coast ocean waters and leaving almost 90% of the coast open to fishing. The Task Force built their compromise around a "middle ground" option that had been created by a coalition of stakeholders.

"No one got everything they wanted, but everyone got something," said Samantha Murray of the Ocean Conservancy, who was a key architect of the "middle-ground" Proposal 1-3. "The Task Force had a difficult task but we hope that this compromise of a compromise will still offer a legacy for all Californians."

The Task Force reviewed three different proposals developed over the past year by an advisory group of conservationists, fishermen, scientists, boaters and divers—one that provided the most protection of sensitive and productive marine habitat, one that provided minimal protection, and a "middle ground" that marked a compromise between the two. Starting with the middle ground proposal, known as proposal 1-3, the Task Force suggested individual protections for iconic places such as the Sonoma Coast, Point Reyes, Fitzgerald Marine Reserve, and the Farallon Islands. The Task Force also recommended special closures to protect seabirds and marine mammals from disturbance.

The Task Force proposal is smaller than two of the three options it considered, and some coastal sites were dropped or given reduced levels of protection. "Seals and sea lions need to be able to breed in peace, and they need food for their pups," said Bob Wilson, of the Marine Mammal Center. "The Task Force's compromise does not offer our wildlife enough food and shelter."

"Duxbury reef is in my backyard, and I think about it every day," said Fred Smith of the Environmental Action Committee of West Marin, a member of the stakeholder advisory group. "It's a shame that some of our greatest treasures are left out of this plan."

The backbone of the Task Force proposal is a network of fully protected marine reserves, where destruction of wildlife and habitat is prohibited. Scientists have found that these high protection areas are extremely effective in rebuilding and preserving marine ecosystems. Studies of existing marine reserves show that reserves over time can allow fish to grow older and bigger, producing up to 200 times as many young. An independent economic evaluation estimated that the worst-case potential impacts of all three plans would affect only 5-8% of the existing economic value of area fisheries.

"This is the second step in creating a statewide network of MPAs, and each time we get better at working together," said Karen Garrison of the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), and a member of the stakeholder advisory group. "Protection of our most productive and most vulnerable marine resources is the smart thing to do if we want to ensure an ocean future for all Californians."

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