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Marine reserves debated during state hearing

Arguments center on conservation vs. public access

BETH CASPER
Statesman Journal

March 7, 2007

Lawmakers, scientists, conservationists and fishermen renewed a debate Tuesday about how best to create a system of marine reserves off Oregon's coast.

The reserves concept for Oregon was the subject of a hearing before the Joint Committee on Emergency Preparedness and Ocean Policy. Afterward, legislators hosted a viewing of the 30-minute documentary "Common Ground: Oregon's Oceans."

Commercial fishermen and conservationists disagreed at the hearing about the extent of the declines of fish populations. Sport fishermen worried about being shut out of the ocean.

Marine reserves are areas that protected from fishing or other extractive activities. Less than 1 percent of the world's oceans are in such set-asides.

Jane Lubchenco, a marine scientist at Oregon State University, told legislators and participants that the world's oceans are changing dramatically from overfishing, pollution and coastal development.

Three high-profile scientific studies have shown that fishing has depleted the oceans, removing 90 percent of all big fish and depleting 25 percent of the



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Ocean bills

House Bill 2924: Introduced by Rep. Deborah Boone, D-Cannon Beach. The bill would appropriate an as-yet undetermined amount of money from the state's general fund to the state for a sea mapping project at Oregon State University.

House Bill 2877: Introduced by Rep. Brad Witt, D-Clatskanie, on behalf of Oregon Anglers. The bill would protect the public's right to access the state waters of the ocean, which extend three miles from shore.

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world's fisheries, she said.

"Technology has allowed us to fish farther and farther from shore, deeper and deeper, more efficiently, more safely and in formerly inaccessible places," she said.

She said marine reserves would not solve all of the ocean's problems, but that they can boost fish populations by allowing fish to get bigger and reproduce more. For example, a 15-inch vermilion rockfish can produce 150,000 young compared with a 24-inch fish that can produce 1.7 million young.

"It makes sense if you are not taking anything out, things grow bigger in there," she said about fish living in marine reserves.

Commercial fisherman Terry Thompson, a Lincoln County commissioner and former legislator, said the state of the fisheries is not that dire.

He pointed to some rebounding rockfish populations off Oregon's coast as examples. Much of the perceived problem, he said, is related to how fish stocks are assessed -- using models that can vary wildly.

Sport fishermen also are cautious about marine reserves.

Oregon Anglers, which lobbies for sport-fishing clubs, helped introduce a bill that would protect the public's right to access all of Oregon's oceans. Any proposed restrictions would have to go through a public process.

"Our intent is not to eliminate the possibility of marine reserves or that sort of thing," said Dennis Richey of Oregon Anglers. "At the same time, there are many, many areas that need more research" before establishing marine reserves, he said.

Oregon Anglers supports an alternate bill, introduced by Rep. Deborah Boone, D-Cannon Beach, to map Oregon's ocean floor, which extends three miles from shore. It would start the process of understanding ocean habitats. Now, 5 percent of the sea floor is mapped. It will take \$6 million to \$7 million more to finish the work, Boone said.

The state's ocean policy advisory council on marine reserves just submitted a draft plan to the governor's office that would start the process of creating a network of reserves off Oregon's coast.

The governor did not set aside money for marine reserves in his budget, which was put together more than a year ago, said Mike Carrier, the governor's natural-resources policy director.

Paul Engelmeyer, the statewide conservation representative for the Audubon

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Society of Portland, said he wants state officials and lawmakers to make ocean protection a priority and allocate money for the study and establishment of marine reserves.

"We are now at the point of asking what kind of legacy do we want to leave?" Engelmeyer said.

Carrier said Kulongoski is committed to ocean protection.

"The governor's top environmental priorities include addressing global warming," Carrier said. "Nowhere is climate change showing up more dramatically than in our world's oceans."

Marine reserves can't protect oceans from global climate changes, but they can protect habitats for all sea species, he said.

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