

California MPA Process Ordered to Start Over: Too Little Input from Fishermen

Public protests about potential fishery closures off the coast of the state of California (US) have led state officials to scrap a two-year process to plan a network of marine reserves, and start over. State officials agreed with recreational fishermen, commercial fishermen, and other groups that stakeholders had not had enough input in the planning process. A new process, expected to begin this month, will involve representatives from an array of stakeholder groups in the study of potential closures.

The effort to plan a series of closures stems from the Marine Life Protection Act (MLPA), a state law passed in October 1999 ([MPA News 1:3](#)). The MLPA requires the California Department of Fish and Game (DFG) to draft a master plan for a network of MPAs in state waters; the plan must meet resource protection goals while considering the needs of interested parties. Responding to the law, DFG convened a team of scientists - referred to as the master plan team - to draw up concept maps of potential new closures. It was these maps that drew stakeholder criticism. In announcing the new inclusive process this past January, DFG Director Robert Hight said he was "wiping the slate clean."

The MLPA calls for the master plan to be "prepared with the advice, assistance and involvement of participants in the various fisheries and their representatives," along with conservationists, scientists, and other stakeholders. Although the master plan team in charge of drawing concept maps had sought public input through letters and public meetings, the letters were sent out too late for feedback to be incorporated in the draft maps. The public meetings often grew hostile, with fishermen asserting their interests were being ignored.

The new process will set up seven regional workgroups to develop options for the MPA network. The groups will include representatives of a variety of interests - recreational and commercial fishing, conservation, tourism, science, and harbor districts. DFG has already sought recommendations on the membership of these workgroups, and officials anticipate the groups will be set by the middle of this month.

"They put us in a defensive position"

"The law says that everyone is going to do this planning together," said Bob Fletcher, president of the Sportfishing Association of California (SAC). "But the [master plan] team drew up a draft set of proposed closures without consulting the fishing industry, and that put us in a defensive position."

Karen Garrison of the Natural Resources Defense Council - an NGO that was instrumental in passage of the MLPA - agrees that there was too little public participation. "There were several unintentional problems with DFG's course of action," she said. With little staff support, the master plan team was able to prepare only a single set of maps, not alternative choices, "which led to widespread fear that the single option was already a done deal," said Garrison. It didn't help, she said, that DFG was hampered by a tight deadline - January 2002 - to draft the plan. Although the state has since extended the deadline to January 2003, this extension came late last year.

DFG Senior Biologist John Ugoretz, in charge of overseeing the new inclusive process, agrees that the master plan team did not have enough time to involve the public sufficiently. He adds, however, that the public only really became interested when the master plan team drew up maps, which came later in its work. "This is a problem with any process to create closed areas," said Ugoretz. "It's very difficult to get people interested until you show them a map with possible closures. And yet they usually get upset with the lines on the map when they see it." He said delaying the drawing of lines allows participants to talk through issues thoroughly beforehand, and arrive at common goals. "But it also delays the airing of some conflicts that really become apparent when the map's lines are drawn," he said.

The new process will not aim for consensus in the workgroups, said Ugoretz. "Consensus, while an honorable goal, is not necessarily realistic," he said. "We will try to narrow down the range of options. It will be critical for DFG to lay out what is required and expected of the groups. People need to know the ground rules and boundaries of the process before they come to the table with suggestions."

SAC's Fletcher said the recreational fishing community is ready to work with other groups to find a solution. "Recreational anglers are finally coming to grips with the fact that we have a tool - marine reserves - that needs to be in place," he said. "But we don't want it to be forced down our throats. The economic impact of reserves needs to be considered in this process."

For more information

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