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Hank Mills, an avid recreational fisherman from Milwaukie, organized a protest in the Chinook Winds Casino Resort parking lot Monday to express his and other sport fishermen's opposition to the possibility of establishing marine reserves in Oregon's territorial sea. A baker's dozen of boats sported signs denouncing Gov. Ted Kulongoski's pursuit of "no take" areas in the nearshore waters off the state's shores. The protest took place during the first day of a two-day public session of the Oregon Ocean Policy Advisory Council (OPAC) to discuss, deliberate, and determine which of 20 proposed marine reserve sites to move to the next level of evaluation. (Photo by Terry Dillman)

Undertow of controversy By Terry Dillman

Of the News-Times

Reams of information, tons of testimony, and deep mud-bottom controversy highlighted the two-day session of the Oregon Ocean Policy Advisory Council (OPAC) in Lincoln City.

Held at Chinook Winds Casino Resort, the Monday morning session featured public input from the 4Ports Group representing Bandon, Port Orford, Gold Beach, and Brookings; changes in state agency analysis of the 20 proposed marine reserve sites presented by Dave Fox and Cristen Don from the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW); and follow-up presentations by 18 of the site nominators, reporting on their outreach efforts and any changes made to their proposals since OPAC's Oct. 23-24 session in Florence.

Of the 20 proposed sites, nine are either entirely within or encroach upon territorial waters off Lincoln County's shoreline.

The state required the proposals - at a minimum - to show evidence of community collaboration and support, feature a variety of marine habitat types, and be large enough to allow scientific evaluation of ecological benefits, but small enough to avoid significant economic or social impacts on ocean users and ocean-dependent communities.

While OPAC members clearly made headway, nominating six of the sites for further evaluation, the Lincoln City session showed how divisive the issue remains. The undertow of controversy has not subsided, nor is it likely to.

Supporters and opponents accused each other of fostering "a hostile atmosphere" toward each other's respective views, and made allegations of failing to work toward "good faith" collaboration in the process.

Opponents of marine reserves say ODFW is doing a good job of applying adaptive fisheries management and is managing the near-shore in a sustainable manner. They point to the 15 nearshore areas already set aside for seabird nesting, marine gardens, and marine protected areas such as Whale Cove. They also say restrictions on bottom fishing by ODFW result in a coastwide marine protected area (MPA) west of the 40-fathom line for much of the available boating season, and combined with winter weather and ocean conditions, becomes a de facto closure of the entire Oregon coast to groundfishing for the entire year west of the MPA boundary.

Supporters say scientific studies from 124 marine reserves around the world show they can bring about consistent changes in the size, diversity, and abundance of marine life within them. They note that Oregon is the only state on the west coast without marine reserves.

Leading the effort to establish marine reserves is Our Ocean, which dubs itself as "a coalition of conservationists, scientists, ocean users, local leaders, and business people from around the state working to preserve Oregon's coastal legacy." Our Ocean - which brings together the resources of the Audubon Society of Portland, Coast Range Association, Environment Oregon, Natural Resources Defense Council, Oceana, Oregon Shores Conservation Coalition, Pacific Marine Conservation Council, and Pew Environmental Group - announced eight proposals Oct. 1, indicating the coalition had "developed its own statewide proposal, in addition to helping local communities develop their own proposals, because scientific research shows that a network or system of marine protected areas and reserves brings the most ecological benefit and safety for ocean users, while minimizing adverse economic impact."

Susan Allen of the Pew Environmental Group directs Our Ocean. She called the nominations "a strong first step," but said the coalition would "continue to press our case for an ecologically significant system of marine reserves and protected areas."

Paul Engelmeyer of the Audubon Society said Oregon deserves the same protections as those in place off the shores of Washington and California.

"This is a significant step toward establishing marine reserves in Oregon," he said. "This effort will create the momentum to plan for existing and future stresses on our fragile nearshore."

Opponents were somewhat mollified that only six sites made the initial cut, but said too many reserves - especially the network proposed by Our Ocean - would kill the coastal economy, especially in communities that rely on fishing.

Commercial and recreational fishers in Depoe Bay are especially concerned. They say the Our Ocean proposals - not just the overall network, but proposed sites on either end of "the world's smallest harbor" - could effectively shut them down. Loren Goddard from the Depoe Bay Nearshore Action Team said the uncertainty of whether or not those other site proposals would pass muster had already caused problems, with one charter facility shutting down and business dropping off elsewhere.

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