Size of Channel Islands No-Fishing Zones May Double

Under a plan unveiled by federal officials, about 20% of the waters around five islands off Ventura and Santa Barbara counties would be closed to fishing.

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Moving to ban fishing fleets from some of California's richest waters, federal authorities unveiled a plan Friday that would double the size of no-fishing zones around the Channel Islands to protect marine life and restore a depleted ocean.

The proposal marks a major expansion of an existing network of marine protected areas and a recognition that closing large tracts of ocean to commercial and recreational fishermen may be necessary to help fish populations rebound.

Under the plan, about 20% of the waters surrounding five islands off Ventura and Santa Barbara counties would be closed to harvest. It doubles existing no-fishing zones to 309 square miles and sets aside an additional 12 square miles as a marine conservation area where fishing is sharply restricted.

The reserves, under federal jurisdiction, would be established in deep water to complement the shallower refuges California created around the islands three years ago. The strategy ensures protection for a variety of species — including lobsters, rockfish, abalone and other creatures — that inhabit reefs, mudflats, kelp forests, sea grass beds and sandy bottoms.

"When you close areas, the data is clear that the fish and lobster are bigger and more abundant, there's a wider variety of species and kelp is richer," said Channel Islands National Marine Sanctuary Supt. Chris Mobley. "We hope these closures … produce more fish and larvae that spread beyond the closure areas and provide more sustainable and better fishing opportunities."

Details of the plan are contained in a draft environmental impact statement the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration released Friday. While the proposal has long been expected, the document identifies specific locations for the marine reserves and invites public comment on the proposal over the next 60 days. The changes won't take effect until after public hearings Sept. 26 in Ventura and Sept. 28 in Santa Barbara, and the approval of a final environmental document.

The announcement comes just days before the state Fish and Game Commission meets to consider a separate plan to establish 26 marine reserves spanning 208 square miles — nearly half of which would exclude all types of fishing — along the Central Coast. The commission is scheduled to discuss that proposal, part of the state's Marine Life Protection Act Initiative, at a meeting Tuesday in Monterey.

Increasingly, scientists, environmentalists and elected officials are turning to marine closures as a method of last resort to save fisheries. Such strategies have idled New England fishing fleets and resulted in the emergency closure of 4,000 square miles of the Pacific from the Palos Verdes Peninsula to the Mexican border to protect cow cod.
The United Nations’ Food and Agriculture Organization estimates that about one-third of the planet's fisheries are significantly overfished.

A scientific paper published in the journal Nature in 2003 by a pair of Canadian researchers showed that 90% of all the big fish in the ocean — including tuna, halibut, swordfish, marlin and shark — were gone. Scientists say that new technologies enable fleets to fish deeper, farther from shore and on rocky bottoms, leaving few places for fish to hide.

"Our coastlines are under increasing stress," said Jane Lubchenco, zoology professor at Oregon State University. "The interest in no-take marine reserves is growing out of increased realization that our oceans are in trouble and that we need to be thinking differently than we have in the past about how to protect the valuable resources that are there."

The federal plan unveiled this week completes an ocean management plan for the northern Channel Islands that began seven years ago. It is a distinct approach because, unlike many existing laws and regulations that protect specific fish species, it designates habitat for protection.

"We're trying to protect whole oceanic zones and ecosystems, and the reserves recognize the interdependence of the marine ecosystem," said Gary Davis, chief marine scientist for the National Park Service.

The changes affect nine areas extending as far as six miles from the shores of San Miguel, Santa Rosa, Santa Cruz, Anacapa and Santa Barbara islands, which make up Channel Islands National Park. The waters are part of an existing national marine sanctuary and are rich in biological diversity because cold-water and warm-water currents mix in the area and upwelling from the deep ocean pumps nutrients near the surface. Blue whales, squid, yellowtail, sea urchins, barracuda, white sea bass, halibut and rockfish ply those waters.

Mobley said 100 fish species and 20 invertebrate species are targeted for harvest around the Channel Islands, and populations of many species show wide variability or declines while some, such as white abalone, are near extinction. He said the proposal to expand marine reserves to include deep water will have a minimal effect on fishermen because they do most of their work in shallow water and some of those sites are already protected.

Jim Marshall of Carpinteria, who dives for sea urchins from his boat Nada Mas, said that while many fishermen question the need for closing down so much of the ocean, anglers have come to accept the changes.

"It's pretty much a done deal," he said. "Everybody is over the shock. It probably won't affect fishermen very much."

But he said that marine reserves remain an unproven tool. Clearly, fish will be safe inside the preserves, but Marshall questions whether they will produce sufficient offspring to repopulate depleted areas outside the refuges.

"It's sort of intuitive that you'll get bigger fish in a reserve, but it's not clear you'll get a benefit outside the reserves," he said. "It's all conjecture because no one really knows."
Joel Greenberg, chairman of the Southern California chapter of the Recreational Fishing Alliance, said he's skeptical marine closures will work and wants to see more assurance that government agencies will monitor conditions at the reserves to see if they indeed lead to improved fisheries. The alliance represents 80,000 members nationwide, including anglers, sportfishing fleets and tackle manufacturers.

"I am highly skeptical about the effectiveness of marine reserves, but not unwilling to look at it and try some to see if they do what they're purported to do," Greenberg said.

Scientists and government officials say that marine reserves offer promise but acknowledge that they need more study. They say closing a portion of the California coast to fishing will provide areas where they can examine how marine life and the ocean environment respond absent human influence, and that should provide lessons that can help to better manage the rest of the ocean and its fisheries.

"Marine reserves are not a panacea," Oregon State's Lubchenco said. "They will not address all the problems. But they need to be implemented and coupled with more enlightened management outside the reserves."

### No fishing

Nine marine reserves of over 300 square miles around the Channel Islands would expand existing state-run refuges into federal waters. Fishing would be banned or sharply restricted to allow depleted fish stocks to recover and to protect marine ecosystems.

*Source: National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration*