

State puts new limits on fishing near shore Charter boats face loss of winter rockfish trade

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New restrictions governing fishing in ocean waters less than 120 feet deep will affect a range of San Diego businesses, from restaurants and markets to the local "party boat" sportfishing fleet.

Local restaurants and fish markets that offer live rockfish and popular delicacies such as sheephead will have a tougher time obtaining those fish from commercial fishers.

And the new state limits on shallow-water fish, combined with more federal restrictions on rockfish that are likely to be imposed this fall, will make it challenging for sportfishing charter boats to generate enough business during the winter. That's the season charter boat skippers traditionally switch to deep-sea fishing for rockfish because of limited opportunities for catching fish near the surface.

The commercial fishers will be affected not only by a reduction in species they can harvest but also by a state proposal to cut the number of commercial licenses.

The changes stem from the state Fish and Game Commission's decision to adopt the first Near-shore Fishery Management Plan for California. The plan sets up a framework for more intensive management of fishing within the state's three-mile jurisdiction, including the establishment of no-fishing zones known as Marine Protected Areas.

The plan also divides the state's 1,100-mile coastline into four regions to better control fishing by commercial and sport anglers, who have been waging an intense battle against each other over a dwindling resource.

Sport anglers turned out en masse at Thursday's commission meeting in Oakland to push for a ban on commercial fishing in the near-shore zone. But commissioners still decided that commercial fishers could take 20 percent of the annual harvest, leaving 80 percent for recreational anglers.

The total allowable catch was reduced from 662 metric tons to 452 metric tons in 2003.

"This is a public resource; it does not belong to the commercial fishermen," said Bob Strickland, president of United Anglers of California. He and other recreational fishers believe they have priority for whatever fish stocks are available.

The regulatory picture is going to be blurred by a strict ban on rockfish and other restrictions the federal Pacific Fisheries Management Council is set to approve next month.

"It's very convoluted and it's going to get worse," Strickland said. "The state is talking about dividing the near-shore area in half, with separate regulations for fishing from the shore to 10 fathoms and from 10 fathoms to 20 fathoms (120 feet)."

San Diego's passenger sportfishing fleet - the party boat operators - will be pinched a little by the new regulations.

"It makes things more difficult, but it's not the end of the world," said John Yamate, general manager of Seaforth Sportfishing at Mission Bay.

Party boat operators north of San Diego face more difficult economic consequences because their boats can't slip into Mexican waters to escape the restrictions.

Mexican waters are 12 miles south of Mission Bay, easily within reach of longer range charter boats. The half-day boats that leave in the morning and return in early afternoon will have to fish for surface fish such as yellowtail or bass.

The near-shore fishery plan approved last week restricts the take of 19 shallow-water species, including 13 rockfish species as well as cabezon, monkeyface prickleback, kelp greenlings and rock greenlings.

For Southern California fishers, the most important fish covered by the plan is California sheephead, a fish highly prized for its delicate crab-like taste.

"The biggest impact will be on the live-fish Asian market," said Craig Ghio, an executive with Anthony Seafoods. "These are places where people come and like to pick live fish out of a tank."

Locally, most of the live-trap fishing is done by commercial lobster fishers when lobster season is closed.

Someone may have to figure out how to farm raise sheephead and other species to satisfy the demand from the live-fish market, he said.

Echoing the concerns of commercial fishers, Ghio said he was concerned that state Fish and Game Department scientists aren't considering population control methods to keep the state's seal and sea lions from further reducing the near-shore fishes.

"I want to make sure all user groups including natural predation by marine mammals is figured into the equation," he said.

San Diego's commercial fishers, many of whom dive for sea urchins or trap lobsters, will have fewer options to make money live-trapping under the near-shore fishery plan.

"Most of the guys are lobster fishermen who need something to do outside of lobster season," said Pete Halmay, a commercial urchin fisher. "I don't know what will happen when they can't fish."

Halmay has asked Fish and Game Department officials to consider a specific set of regulations for the sub-region comprising waters off Orange and San Diego counties.

His idea is to customize fishing regulations so that small-scale commercial fishers can continue to make a living by selling most of their harvest to local fresh-fish markets along the waterfront.

"We've got to keep the little guys in," Halmay said. "The big guys don't find enough to catch in the near-shore waters."

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