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Page Updated: Saturday, June 25, 2005 9:29 AM PDT

Ocean panel to reconvene after marine reserves flap

By Jeff Barnard, AP Environmental Writer

GRANTS PASS - The Oregon Ocean Policy Advisory Council will meet next week for the first time since collapsing in a bitter battle over its support for creating marine reserves to protect fisheries habitat in state waters.

Nearly three years later, the issue remains unresolved.

"It is a hot button," said Jim Myron, a natural resources adviser to Gov. Ted Kulongoski. Myron will serve as chairman at the first meeting of the reconstituted council when it meets Thursday in Newport.

Myron said the governor would like to see the council go forward with its previous recommendation to look into creating a network of marine reserves inside the state's three-mile territorial limit.

Reserves could be created through legislation, extending state parks boundaries into the seabed, or asking the Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission to consider no-fishing zones.

Some scientists recommend creating areas off-limits to fishing to serve as havens and nurseries for fish, particularly those nearshore species of rockfish whose numbers have collapsed in recent years, leading to drastic cutbacks in harvests.

"We are certainly not going to, even if we wanted to, cram something down the throats of coastal communities," Myron said. "In the end, if we don't have the support of coastal communities, it will not work anyway. We have to have a critical mass of people behind the idea before it will go anywhere."

The council last met in August 2002, when it recommended to then-Gov. John Kitzhaber that he embark on a lengthy public process to consider creating a network of marine reserves in state waters. The council left out such details as how many reserves, how big they should be, and what sort of restrictions they should entail.

Feeling steamrolled by the state, some council members representing fishermen and coastal communities opposed the recommendation. Afterwards, the Legislature reconstituted the council to reduce the amount of power held by the governor and state agencies.

Coos County Commissioner John Griffith - a critic of marine reserves whom Gov. Ted Kulongoski has repeatedly refused to appoint to the council, despite his nomination by southern coastal counties - questioned the sincerity of Myron's pledge to get the support of coastal communities.

Southern counties currently have no representative on the council, Griffith said.

Samantha Murray, assistant conservation director of the Audubon Society of Portland, said she did not expect the issue to be as controversial as it was in 2002.