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Ocean policy council again tackles marine reserves

By Susan Chambers, Staff Writer

CHARLESTON - Like any controversial topic, marine reserves got a lot of attention at the end of a long day on Friday.

The Ocean Policy Advisory Council, a state group whose purpose is to make recommendations to the governor, met at the South Slough National Estuarine Research Reserve in Charleston. Members took up the issue of a planning process for marine reserves, taking into consideration the council's 2002 recommendation on marine research reserves, Gov. Ted Kulongoski's letter to OPAC earlier this year regarding reserves, and the council's own commitment to a community-based planning effort.

The reserves issue caused a lot of controversy a few years ago and some of the same issues that stalled discussions then still exist. Opponents argue that establishing set-aside areas in the ocean - areas in which there is no activity such as fishing or mining - could have serious impacts on sport and commercial fishermen. Oftentimes, these folks have been the most vocal.

But on Friday, the non-fishing, conservation-oriented public dominated the open comment period. Several members of the audience of about 30 people wore tags that read, "Marine reserves," in black letters, and "YES!" in red letters.

The more than 20-person council spent more than an hour discussing several facets of the planning process - just the planning process. Not specific reserve sites, not specific sizes.

And that frustrated several in the audience.

"I think we need to see more action," Juli Scott said, noting that it was a little disconcerting to her that the council still was in the early stages of the decision process.

Oregon Ocean, an environmental group formed earlier this year, director Carolyn Waldron also commented that the reserves issue was effectively getting tabled, but suggested that the council move forward on the issue since Kulongoski specifically requested it and because other countries have seen success using reserves as management tools.

But earlier, during the council's discussions, several councilors brought up the fact that it's not that simple to just move forward.

Members talked about:

n Community involvement: What is the best way to get the communities discussing the issue?

n Budgets: Planning, establishment and enforcement is going to take money; what are the state and federal budget cycles and how do any state requests fit with those cycles?

n Understanding: Do communities have a good understanding of all the issues regarding marine reserves and the species of fish, shellfish and mammals in the 3-mile strip of territorial waters?

n Partners: Are there other organizations that could help the council with its planning?

n Wave energy: Three separate power firms have requested information from the state about the possibility of establishing offshore energy generation sources; and

n Baseline data: What information currently is available and what is needed?

Terry Thompson, a former commercial fisherman from Newport, addressed some of the issues regarding fisheries.

Though seven species of fish are listed by the federal government as being overfished, all of them are on the continental shelf, an area outside of state waters. As juveniles, some of those species live for a short time in nearshore waters, but establishing marine reserves within three miles of shore for the primary purpose of improving the stocks that live offshore may not accomplish as much as reserve supporters hope. There are, on the other hand, some species that spend more of their lives in nearshore waters.

Thompson asked Patty Burke, Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife marine resources program manager, for baseline data about the fish and sport and commercial activity in state waters. That kind of information can be difficult to track down. Should ODFW do that or OPAC's proposed science committee do it? Burke asked.

"I don't think everyone in this room is up to speed on nearshore species population dynamics," Thompson said.

Council members also discussed the wave energy issue, noting that it has changed dramatically over the last three months and that, they should get more input on it from state agencies at the next meeting before proceeding.

The next OPAC meeting is scheduled for Jan. 20, 2006, in Newport.

-- CLOSE WINDOW --