



Posted on Sat, Aug. 11, 2007

Monday, Aug 13,
2007

Anglers to put skills to use in fish study

David Sneed

Dozens of recreational anglers will take to San Luis Obispo County waters beginning this month as part of one of the largest collaborative fisheries research projects in state history.

Sportfishing boats from Morro Bay and Port San Luis will make a dozen trips to waters off Point Buchon and Montaña de Oro State Park through October, and volunteers will catch, tag and release rockfish and other shallow-water species.

The study will look at fish stocks from San Mateo County to San Luis Obispo County.

Data recorded from these fishing expeditions will be used by state regulators to evaluate the effectiveness of a network of marine reserves that will go into effect in September off the Central Coast.

The data will also give regulators a more accurate idea of how many fish inhabit local waters, said Cal Poly biology professor Dean Wendt, one of the project's lead researchers. Regulators use these stock assessments to decide how much fishing is allowed.

"You have a chance to become part of history," Don Maruska, the project's facilitator and adviser, told a group of anglers Wednesday in Morro Bay who were interested in volunteering.

The study is funded by grants from the state Department of Fish and Game and the state Ocean Protection Council. The fisheries assessment study is part of \$2 million in research to be done to gauge the ecological and socioeconomic effects of the marine reserves.

Wendt is also trying to find funding for a similar research project using commercial fishermen. They would use traps and hook-and-line assemblies to sample shallow waters inaccessible to party boat anglers.

Protected areas

In September, a network of marine protected areas encompassing 18 percent of Central Coast waters will go into effect. In these areas, fishing will either be banned or severely limited.

One of these marine reserves will stretch from Point Buchon south to the exclusion zone around Diablo Canyon nuclear power plant.

At Wednesday's meeting in Morro Bay, local fishermen helped Wendt select highly productive fishing grounds within the marine reserve that will be fished as part of the study.

They also selected similar areas off Montaña de Oro, outside the marine reserve, to be fished as reference areas. These regions will be used to measure the changes in fish populations that take place within the marine reserve after it goes into effect.

Project organizers hope to line up funding to make the project a permanent part of monitoring for the marine protected areas.

"We'd like to do this for many, many years," Wendt said. "The data become more powerful and relevant the longer you collect it."

Concurrent with the Morro Bay and Port San Luis research, anglers from Monterey and Half Moon Bay are conducting identical fishing expeditions. They will be sampling areas in and out of marine protected zones planned for Año Nuevo and Point Lobos, said Rick Starr, a marine adviser with Moss Landing Marine Laboratory.

Strengths of the study

The fact that the fisheries study will cover a large area is one of its strengths. State regulators say studies over broad swaths of ocean produce data that are much more useful than ones that concentrate on localized areas.

John Rowley with Virg's Sportfishing in Morro Bay and other anglers said they are frustrated that information

gathered in earlier, more localized surveys was not used by state regulators.

Another strength of the fisheries assessment is the fact that all the boats will use identical gear and fishing methods. Anglers on each boat will use the same three types of lures and fish in randomly selected segments of the study areas.

Each boat will have at least nine anglers who catch as many fish as they can at various locations within the study area and then place them in tanks. Research assistants on board will measure and tag each fish before it is returned to the ocean.

Previous party boat surveys have shown that blue rockfish account for about half the fish caught, with the other half a mixture of other rockfish and ling cod. Fishing for the study is limited to depths of 120 feet to minimize the number of fish killed during the research.

© 2007 San Luis Obispo Tribune and wire service sources. All Rights Reserved.
<http://www.sanluisobispo.com>