

We must care for oceans

By Sam Farr

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No matter what has to change to Keep Santa Cruz Weird, the ocean will always be a constant. From the beaches to the boardwalk to the surfing, our oceanfront location goes a long way toward defining our city.

But while Santa Cruz has been an excellent steward for our oceans, many other communities don't share that record. Luckily, the nation's view of our oceans is changing for the better, and I'm proud to be a part of that change.

To see the effects that humans have on the environment, we need look no further than the recent decision by the Pacific Fishery Management Council to impose a ban on commercial and recreational salmon fishing. But what some see as an isolated set of circumstances is just another symptom of a larger disease: we are failing to take care of our oceans.

Harmful algal blooms and dead zones are occurring more frequently and are larger and more harmful. Last year's oil spill in the San Francisco Bay showed how vulnerable we are to a larger spill. And salmon aren't the only species facing danger: from sea otters in the Pacific to manatees in the Atlantic, wildlife is bearing the brunt of our neglect.

What I think we have lost sight of is the necessity for balance. Of course we want to preserve our oceans as centers of recreation and wildlife, but we must also recognize their invaluable role in commerce and transportation. What we lack are the tools necessary to balance those interests.

I've written and spoken at great length in the past about Oceans-21, a bill I introduced last year that includes provisions to better manage and care for our oceans. I'm proud to say that this bill has taken a major step toward final passage; on Wednesday, it was passed out of the Natural Resources Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife and Oceans. Its next step will be consideration by the full House Committee on Natural Resources. It will then move to a vote by the full House.

This piece of legislation, officially known as the Oceans Conservation, Education, and National Strategy for the 21st Century Act (H.R. 21), would offer the framework that our many overlapping laws and organizations desperately need to function properly. It would allow these many pieces of a larger puzzle to fit together as a whole.

The area of water that our laws cover is vast. The United States controls the world's largest exclusive economic zone, a 200-mile buffer to which we have international rights. That's a total area of over 4 million square miles. And to govern that area, we have around 140 laws managed and enforced by 20 different agencies. It's no surprise that many of our laws overlap one another and agencies engage in a tug-of-war for control.

That's where Oceans-21 comes into play. The primary goal of this bill is to consolidate national management of oceans while creating a system of regional governance bodies.

This legislation would create a Committee on Ocean Policy with the task of coordinating federal agencies, better integrating state and local governments and advising the president on ocean policy issues. This committee will be headed by a national ocean adviser, who will also serve in the president's cabinet. The committee will include six coastal governors appointed by the National Governors Association and secretaries of federal agencies with interest in ocean policy.

But the ocean doesn't always listen to Washington. The bill also creates nine regional partnerships to help manage large-scale issues. When you consider the differences between the waters off the coasts of Maine, Florida, Texas and California, the idea of a set of laws governed at the national level with little regional or local input is laughable. Who better to decide how local waters and watersheds should be managed than local governments and other stakeholders? The regional bodies will include representatives from a broad spectrum of stakeholders, from state and local officials to fishermen and environmental groups.

The bill will also officially codify the duties of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. This important agency, with roots dating back to 1807, has never been officially codified into law and its duties have never been formally established. It's time to make NOAA official. Finally, the legislation establishes an Oceans and Great Lakes Conservation Trust Fund that would pay for the regional governance mechanisms.

This is the third Congress into which the bill has been introduced. The previous two versions were swept under the rug by the Republican leadership, but with Democrats in control, the outlook is much brighter.

Oceans-21 is the result of years of bipartisan work by House Oceans Caucus, of which I am a co-chair. The provisions are based on recommendations from Pew Oceans Commission and U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy. We've worked hard over the past few months to revise the bill, taking into account input from around the country. We truly have a law that represents all interests, a bill that we can be proud of.

We owe it to future generations to enact policies and management strategies that protect our coastal and ocean resources. Oceans-21 would allow for regional management and cooperation between state and federal programs. It's time we pass this bill and turn our attention to safeguarding our oceans.