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Reaching the  
point of no return

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Report says 20  
percent of  
federally  
managed ocean species overfished



SAN DIEGO -- Along the West Coast, populations of 10 species of ocean fish, such as the yellowfin tuna and canary rockfish, have dwindled to historically low levels or are being depleted rapidly by overfishing, according to a report released Wednesday by the conservation group Environment California.

Those species represent 20 percent of the 49 marine fisheries managed by the federal government in waters that are three to 200 miles off the coasts of California, Oregon and Washington. Most of the species swim up and down the West Coast, including in the waters off of San Diego County.

While acknowledging some species are in decline, fishing enthusiasts say they worry that an overreaction to the problem could put them on the sidelines.

"We are facing a huge overfishing problem," said Aida Navarro, wildlife conservation program manager for the environmental group Wildcoast, in a downtown San Diego news conference held to discuss the report. "We are taking too many fish out of the ocean."

Kevin Hovel, associate professor of biology at San Diego State University, added, "We are reaching the point of no return in doing irreparable harm to our oceans."

Event organizers said the report's release was timed to influence the development of new fishing regulations in response to 2006 amendments to the 1976 Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation Management Act, the main law governing this country's marine fisheries.

The Pacific Fishery Management Council, which manages West Coast fishing for the National Marine Fisheries Service, is scheduled to discuss new catch limits when it meets in November in San Diego.

Local fishing enthusiasts have expressed concern recently about the possibility that federal and state officials will curb their fishing privilege as they implement the amended federal law to create marine wildlife reserves in state waters within 3 miles of the shoreline.

Blue Water Tackle owner Kent Sliger in Solana Beach said earlier this fall that he wants to conserve fish species as much as anybody, "but there are extreme environmental groups who want to close it off to everybody."

Reached Wednesday afternoon, Tom Raftican, president of the 40,000-member United Anglers of Southern California, which represents recreational fishermen who throw their lines in the water from the shore and from boats, said his group supports reasonable limits.

"As recreational fishermen, we're strong advocates for good conservation," Raftican said. "We're looking to build

healthy populations."

Debbie Moguillansky, a San Diego member of Environment California, said not only should the council adopt sound catch limits that protect species and help them rebound, it should respond to violations by halting fishing or slashing limits for subsequent seasons.

At the same time, the conservationists and the professor stressed that they were not at all trying to shut down commercial or recreational fishing.

"The species that we are trying to preserve here is the fisherman," Navarro said, after the news conference. "If there are no fish, there are no fishermen."

But Hovel said the interests of the imperiled species should come first.

"The first consideration in decision making must be science, and not politics or special interests," he said. "Managers should weigh the costs of being proactive now against the cost of having to shut down fisheries in the future when species collapse."

The report states that past overfishing has put seven Pacific species in a precarious position.

For example, just 9 percent of the original population of canary rockfish remains, and the report estimates it will take 66 years to restore the species to even 40 percent of the historical level.

Also remaining are 11 percent of the bocaccio, 17 percent of the cowcod, darkblotched rockfish and yelloweye rockfish, 23 percent of the Pacific Ocean perch and 31 percent of the widow rockfish that live along the U.S. West Coast.

The report says in addition that bigeye tuna, yellowfin tuna and petrale sole are being caught so fast that their numbers are declining rapidly.

Locally, there is growing concern about the spiny lobster, which is not one of the 10 mentioned in the report, Hovel said.

"The vast majority of spiny lobsters in this state are taken out of Point Loma," he said. "We haven't seen a crash in the lobster population in San Diego. But we are seeing signs that they are being overfished."

Hovel said the number and size of lobsters being caught along the San Diego County coast are beginning to decline.

The report says recreational saltwater fishing pumps about \$3 billion a year into the West Coast economy.

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