

Chumash council nominates coast for sanctuary status

Northern Chumash Tribal Council asks National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration for protection of coastline

BY KATHE TANNER

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A stretch of ocean off the Central California coast, from Cambria to just north of Gaviota, has been nominated by the Northern Chumash Tribal Council and members of the public for protection as a national marine sanctuary.

Documents were submitted Monday, asking the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) to create the Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary, which would fill in a protected-area gap in offshore waters between the Monterey Bay and Channel Islands sanctuaries (established in 1992 and 1980, respectively).

The swath of ocean being considered for the Chumash sanctuary stretches along the shorelines of both San Luis Obispo and Santa Barbara counties, as far as 30 miles out to sea, according to Andrew Christie, the director of the Sierra Club Santa Lucia Chapter.

Marine sanctuary designation for the area would preserve unique cultural and natural resources and permanently prevent offshore oil and gas development in the protected area, according to an economic report prepared in October.

Among those cultural resources are vast stretches of land and sea that Chumash and other Native American tribes consider sacred, with history and significance that span many centuries. Chumash were accomplished mariners who traveled to the Channel Islands by canoe.

Designation of the area would “protect our pristine south Central California coastline and designate these local ocean waters to be protected by the highest levels of preservation for future generations,” San Luis Obispo Mayor Jan Marx wrote to NOAA on Jan. 28.

The ocean area there “also features the Santa Lucia Bank, with benthic communities of worldwide significance,” County Supervisor Bruce Gibson wrote in his support letter Dec. 15, referring to the sea floor ecosystem.

The bank is “where 13 species of whales and dolphins gather and feed,” and also includes “three major upwellings; a 3,000-meter-deep, five-fingered submarine canyon; and cetacean ... migration lanes.”

“This extraordinary offshore environment is deeply connected to shore ecosystems that include wetlands, coastal dunes, estuaries and rookeries,” Gibson wrote.

The recently revamped designation process to create a marine sanctuary, which will take at least two years to complete and likely much longer, began officially with the detailed, formal application sent to Bill Douros, NOAA’s western regional director.

He Thursday that, in the new process, NOAA is requiring proof of “broad-based community support” at the outset, rather than having agency staff select a site and then try to determine if the locals support the concept.

What makes the Chumash application different, he said, is that the area has been considered before, and the nomination for the Central Coast National Marine Sanctuary in the early 1990s had considerable community support.

Although Douros can’t comment much on the current 24-page application, in part because “we just got it and we’re just now digesting it,” one thing he noticed immediately was that the community support has continued. “The support has been durable over many decades,” he said, a distinction that may prove to be quite important.

NOAA has received five applications under the new process. Douros said one application has been accepted and two turned down. The two rejections shared “a lack of broad-based community support and of clarity in what was being nominated.”

NOAA, through Douros, will have 30 days to review the documents in the first stage of qualification, according to Margaret “P.J.” Webb of Cambria, who said Wednesday she has been working on the new sanctuary process at the grassroots level “for years” as an individual. Webb is chairwoman of the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary Advisory Council, which has yet to weigh in officially on the new proposal.

A wide range of agencies, groups and individuals have endorsed the application, however, from the California Coastal Commission and the San Luis Obispo City Council to various Surfrider chapters, the Sierra Club and Cambria Fishing Club.

“Letters of endorsement are rolling in now,” Webb said, as she and others extend the reach of the campaign, one meeting at a time.

Douros estimated it would be the middle of March or so before the regional office can determine if the Chumash application is a complete package and begin more detailed evaluation, including “checking in with other governmental and tribal agencies,” and reviewing the proposal with any opponents.

When the Monterey Bay sanctuary was proposed, opposition came from oil and gas interests, representatives of the fishing industry and jade hunters, among others.

Fred Collins of San Luis Obispo, administrator for the Northern Chumash Tribal Council, has been blanketing the Central Coast with appointments, meetings, presentations and phone conferences with mayors and other leaders, representatives of service groups ... just about anybody who will listen and who can help.

“We’re continuing to get community support,” he said.

Collins hopes to get an endorsement from county supervisors March 24, when he wants to give them a full presentation on the proposal.

Webb said Douros has three choices in this first phase: He can ask for more information at the regional level, determine the application is complete and suitable and forward it on to the federal level, or deny it.

Webb said she doesn’t expect the last option will happen.