

Two Santa Cruz companies seek state approval to grow abalone

^{Fish}
The Associated Press

SACRAMENTO — If the state approves, a handful of companies will begin setting up cages off the San Mateo County coast where they could be cultivating millions of red abalone.

The venture would give the region the largest concentration of abalone farms in the state. But commercial fishers at Pillar Point Harbor, who say the farms will upset the ecosystem, are crying foul.

Abalone, considered a delicacy, can command \$6 wholesale for a live, farmed-raised specimen about the size of a cowboy's belt buckle.

As the wild harvest of abalone continues to fall, a handful of companies wants to raise more than 5 million red abalone in cages suspended by rafts in Pillar Point Harbor.

One company, US Abalone, already has a small farming opera-

tion at Pillar Point.

But anglers fear the added rafts will take up so much space in the harbor that they will lose part of their only sheltered anchorage between San Francisco and Santa Cruz.

And abalone are prolific at producing noxious byproducts, raising concern that tons of abalone feces will pile up on the harbor's floor and dirty the water.

Fishers also worry that millions of abalone and their decaying waste will sap the water of oxygen, leading to the deaths of sardines, anchovies, halibut and other commercial species.

The debate is just the latest over abalone. Divers once plucked huge numbers from California's shallow waters. With its flat, muscular foot, an abalone clings to rocks by day and at night feeds on plants it scrapes up with its tongue.

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But the annual harvest of 5 million pounds in the 1950s plunged to just 260,000 pounds in 1995. The crash has been blamed on pollution, over-harvesting, poachers and hungry sea otters.

The low wild supply heightens the opportunity within Pillar Point's breakwater.

Four companies — Pacific Offshore Farms of Santa Cruz, Princeton Abalone of Half Moon Bay, Pearl Abalone of Santa Cruz and Blue Pacific — have received approval from the Harbor District, but plans are on hold pending further studies ordered by the Coastal Commission and Regional Water Quality Control Board.

"The quality of the harbor water is now excellent," said Coastal Commission planner Joy Chase. "We need to find that (abalone farming) is not going to affect the quality or the biologic productivity of the water."