

Local

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Plan to boost bay fishing catches flak

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MOSS LANDING — A plan to raise and release hundreds of thousands of rock cod, halibut and salmon is being studied by Moss Landing harbor officials who want to improve commercial fishing in the Monterey Bay.

Such commercial production of young fish has long been undertaken with salmon, but has rarely been tried with other fish species such as rock fish and halibut — and never locally.

"We're hoping to enhance the local economic base, and the fishing industry in Monterey Bay," said Tom Villa, a Moss Landing Port commissioner. "The industry has been declining and this would be part of an economic recovery package."

Scientists, however, say the raising of species other than salmon will be difficult at best and doubt it will be cost-effective.

Such talk does not discourage Villa, who envisions Moss Landing becoming the site of a major aquaculture facility that would ensure a strong fishery for generations to come.

The plan is at a conceptual stage only, but Villa said the harbor would like to release 45,000 king salmon in the first year of the program, and begin raising rock fish and halibut. Eventually the program could re-

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lease as many as a half million chinook salmon a year, along with equal numbers of other species of commercial fish.

"Any indigenous strain can be raised," Villa said. "We could breed and release halibut, rock fish and white sea bass."

Richard Parrish, a fisheries biologist with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, said the harbor should stick to salmon.

"We have done studies on enhancing fisheries and the result is that they aren't going to get the money back they put into it," Parrish said. "One problem is (rock fish) are released at a small size and the mortality rate is so high in the wild."

Another problem is that rock fish are very slow to grow. A commercial-sized rock fish of five to seven

pounds may be 30 to 40 years old, Parrish said.

"Rock fish don't mature for six to seven years," Parrish said. "Salmon are very fast growing. From a salmon four-inches long to 30 pounds takes three years. A rock fish in that time will only weigh two pounds."

Salmon also return to where they were bred, making harvesting more predictable and successful. Still a harvest of only three percent of the salmon released is as good as can be expected, scientists said.

Rock fish are less predictable and have higher mortality rates. Rockfish are born in a larval state and drift in the sea at the mercy of currents until they develop fins and are able to swim. If they survive, most rockfish will take up residence in a rocky area where they stay for years, according to scientists.

Halibut return to shallow sandy areas of Monterey Bay in the late summer to spawn, but how effective a halibut hatchery program would be is open to question.

"Halibut might well see an improvement because the population is low," said Don Pearson, a marine biologist with the National Fisheries Service. "But the rock fishery is in pretty good shape. I don't think you would see any improvement. All you are really going to be doing is releasing more food into the ecosystem."

According to Pearson, between the Farallon Islands off San Francisco to Santa Cruz there are more than 300,000 pounds of commercial rock fish species.

With the decline of the salmon population in recent years, and regulated cutbacks in salmon takes, the local fishing industry will become more dependent upon rockfish and other species, industry analysts said.

According to state Fish and Game Department statistics, the commercial Monterey Bay salmon catch in 1991 was 748,269 pounds with a value of \$1,881,835.

The commercial halibut catch in the bay in 1991 was 56,701 pounds, valued at \$144,028.

Rockfish had the largest catch in tonnage with 3,095,478 pounds caught in the bay — less than half of what was caught in 1985. The value of the rock fish catch was not determined due to the large number of species and different market prices, a fish and game analyst said.

Both scientists and fishermen said the rockfish take is declining, due both to tighter regulations and less fish.

Villa said that to make up for the decline, the harbor should look toward enhancing the fisheries.

The Moss Landing Port Commission will be applying for federal grants later this year, and if all goes well, Villa said they hope to get some commercial aquaculture started within two years.

"At least we're trying to do something," Villa said.