TITLE 14. Fish and Game Commission
Notice of Proposed Changes in Regulations

NOTICE IS HEREBY GIVEN that the Fish and Game Commission (Commission), pursuant to the authority vested by sections 200, 202, 205, 210, 220, 240, 5521 and 7149.8 of the Fish and Game Code and to implement, interpret or make specific sections 200, 202, 205, 220, 5521, 7145 and 7149.8 of said Code, proposes to amend Section 29.15, Title 14, California Code of Regulations, relating to Abalone.

Informative Digest/Policy Statement Overview

Under existing regulations (Section 29.15, Title 14, CCR), red abalone may only be taken for recreational purposes north of a line drawn due west magnetic from the center of the mouth of San Francisco Bay. Current regulations also specify: season, hours, daily limits, special gear provisions, measuring devices, abalone report card requirements, and minimum size limit.

The regulation change is being proposed in response to the guidelines in the Abalone Recovery and Management Plan (ARMP), adopted by the Commission in 2005, with regard to average abalone density at eight index sites (surveyed on a three year cycle) within Mendocino and Sonoma counties. Observations by Department of Fish and Wildlife (Department) wildlife officers and data analyses by biologists were considered in proposing the regulation changes, as well as input from fishing groups, the Recreational Abalone Advisory Committee, non-governmental organizations, and the public. Recent scuba surveys indicate that the average density of emergent abalone (sublegal and legal sized) has trended downward over the past five to ten years. Average density is now at 0.47 abalone per meter square (m^2) for the index sites which is below one of the management triggers established in the ARMP. Low average densities and declining trends indicate a risk that leaving regulations unchanged could result in further reductions in average density across the fishery which could lead to fishery closure if average densities fall below 0.30 abalone/m^2. Consequently, the Department is proposing regulations which will reduce the catch so that further reductions in average density may be prevented.

Additionally, average abalone density at the Fort Ross index site has fallen below the trigger level for site closure within the ARMP. The Department is proposing site closure of the Fort Ross area for a period between two and six years to allow recovery of abalone stocks to a level that allows reopening of the area. The Commission may select the duration of closure within the two to six year range or may elect to close the site without specifying a sunset date. The Department will continue to monitor density at Fort Ross (triennially) and recruitment events (annually) in northern California during the site closure in order to evaluate if the site should reopen or remain closed based on current ARMP criteria. The Department also anticipates revising the ARMP during this time frame to transition to the long term, area-based, management plan. Re-opening Fort Ross will likely be considered under the revised ARMP, as well as based on evidence of recovery at the site.

The proposed regulations will close the Fort Ross area and options are provided to reduce fishing hours, the annual limit, daily bag limit, and/or season. The following summarizes the options for regulatory change in Title 14, Section 29.15.

Option 1: Change the legal fishing hours to begin at a time within the range of 7:00 AM to 8:00 AM instead of one-half hour before sunrise.

Option 2: Reduce the daily bag and possession limit from three abalone to two abalone.

Option 3: Reduce the season from seven months to fewer open months with various sub-options for closing months. If the Fort Ross Area Closure is not adopted, the open season for the Fort Ross area may be different than the general open season.

Option 4: Reduce the annual limit with various sub-options for reduction (21 to 9 abalone).

Option 5: Targeted catch reduction in Sonoma and Marin counties by apportioning tags by areas (3-21 tags in the targeted area, not to exceed the total annual limit selected in Option 4).

Options 1 through 5 are designed to reduce the total catch by up to an estimated 33 percent. This conforms to provisions in the ARMP that prescribe a 25 percent reduction in catch when average density levels are below the ARMP trigger for management action.

The Commission may adopt one or more options or a combination of options.

In all options, regulatory language concerning a temporary special closure of Sonoma County is repealed.

The regulation options will benefit the red abalone population in northern California by enhancing the sustainability of the resource. Higher densities of red abalone in closer proximity to their neighbors have better fertilization and reproductive success than those at low densities. The proposed regulation changes are anticipated to increase the density of red abalone, leading to a healthier resource and improving the long-term health of the fishery.

Higher densities of red abalone are anticipated to enhance local small businesses in the coastal economy that rely on abalone fishing for their income. A healthy active fishery will attract more business to the coastal regions in the north particularly in the counties of Marin, Sonoma, Mendocino and Humboldt.

The environment will benefit from the proposed regulation options in the following ways: (1) The algal community will continue to be grazed by a stable population of red abalone in northern California rocky subtidal habitats. This grazing will maintain algal communities and prevent them from overgrowing reef communities; (2) Abalone will continue to act as important macrograzers maintaining substrate suitable for other invertebrates; and (3) Abalone will provide an important food source for other marine life in rocky subtidal kelp communities.

The proposed regulations are neither inconsistent nor incompatible with existing state regulations. Section 20, Article IV, of the State Constitution specifies that the Legislature may delegate to the Fish and Game Commission such powers relating to the protection and propagation of fish and game as the Legislature sees fit. The Legislature has delegated to the Commission the power to regulate the recreational take of abalone (sections 200, and 205, Fish and Game Code). The Commission has reviewed its own regulations and finds that the proposed regulations are neither inconsistent nor incompatible with existing state regulations. The Commission has searched the California Code of Regulations and finds no other state agency regulations pertaining to the recreational take of abalone.

NOTICE IS GIVEN that any person interested may present statements, orally or in writing, relevant to this action at a hearing to be held at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA), De Neve Plaza, 351 Charles E. Young Drive – West, Los Angeles, California, on Wednesday, May 22, 2013, at 8:30 a.m., or as soon thereafter as the matter may be heard.

NOTICE IS ALSO GIVEN that any person interested may present statements, orally or in writing, relevant to this action at a hearing to be held at the Department of Consumer Affairs, 1747 North Market Boulevard, Sacramento, California, on Wednesday, June 26, 2013, at 8:30 a.m., or as soon thereafter as the matter may be heard. Written comments may be submitted on or before June 24, 2013 at the address given below, or by fax at (916) 653-5040, or by e-mail to FGC@fgc.ca.gov. All comments must be received no later than June 26, 2013 at the hearing in Sacramento, CA. If you would like copies of any modifications to this proposal, please include your name and mailing address.

The regulations as proposed in strikeout-underline format, as well as an initial statement of reasons, including environmental considerations and all information upon which the proposal is based (rulemaking file), are on file and available for public review from the agency representative, Sonke Mastrup, Executive Director, Fish and Game Commission, 1416 Ninth Street, Box 944209, Sacramento, California 94244-2090, phone (916) 653-4899. Please direct requests for the above mentioned documents and inquiries concerning the regulatory process to Sonke Mastrup or Sherrie Fonbuena at the preceding address or phone number.
Paul Hamdorf, Acting Manager of Marine Region, Department of Fish and Wildlife, phone (562) 342-7210, has been designated to respond to questions on the substance of the proposed regulations. Copies of the Initial Statement of Reasons, including the regulatory language, may be obtained from the address above. Notice of the proposed action shall be posted on the Fish and Game Commission website at http://www.fgc.ca.gov.

Availability of Modified Text

If the regulations adopted by the Commission differ from but are sufficiently related to the action proposed, they will be available to the public for at least 15 days prior to the date of adoption. Circumstances beyond the control of the Commission (e.g., timing of Federal regulation adoption, timing of resource data collection, timelines do not allow, etc.) or changes made to be responsive to public recommendation and comments during the regulatory process may preclude full compliance with the 15-day comment period, and the Commission will exercise its powers under Section 202 of the Fish and Game Code. Regulations adopted pursuant to this section are not subject to the time periods for adoption, amendment or repeal of regulations prescribed in Sections 11343.4, 11346.4 and 11346.8 of the Government Code. Any person interested may obtain a copy of said regulations prior to the date of adoption by contacting the agency representative named herein.

If the regulatory proposal is adopted, the final statement of reasons may be obtained from the address above when it has been received from the agency program staff.

Impact of Regulatory Action/Results of the Economic Impact Analysis

The potential for significant statewide adverse economic impacts that might result from the proposed regulatory action has been assessed, and the following initial determinations relative to the required statutory categories have been made:

(a) Significant Statewide Adverse Economic Impact Directly Affecting Business, Including the Ability of California Businesses to Compete with Businesses in Other States:

The proposed action will not have a significant statewide adverse economic impact directly affecting business, including the ability of California businesses to compete with businesses in other states. Depending on which regulatory option the Commission chooses, the proposed action could reduce recreational abalone activity expenditures and thus reduce direct revenue by 1.4 percent to as much as 36.9 percent. These outcomes could result in adverse revenue impacts to businesses ranging from $182,000 (2009$) to $4.8 million (2009$) in potential direct revenue losses. In the North Coast area most affected by these potential losses, the resulting impact to the economy could range from $324,000 (2009$) to $8.5 million (2009$) in total economic output losses. This is due to the ripple effect each dollar of direct revenue has on the affected regional economy's total output potential. Nonetheless, the proposed regulations would not result in a significant statewide adverse economic impact.

The impacts are not likely to affect the ability of California businesses to compete with businesses in other States, since these activities focus on resources and features unique to the North Coast.

(b) Impact on the Creation or Elimination of Jobs Within the State, the Creation of New Businesses or the Elimination of Existing Businesses, or the Expansion of Businesses in California; Benefits of the Regulation to the Health and Welfare of California Residents, Worker Safety, and the State's Environment:

The Commission does not anticipate any impacts on the creation of new business, the elimination of existing businesses or the expansion of businesses in California.

Depending on which regulatory option the Commission chooses, the potential reduced recreational abalone activity could result in job losses ranging from 0 jobs to as many as 82 jobs in abalone sport fishing related businesses. The Commission does not anticipate the creation of any new jobs.

Benefits to the Health and Welfare of California Residents: Depending on which regulatory option the Commission chooses, the potential reduced recreational abalone activity in the spring months when ocean conditions can be dangerous could result in enhanced fisherman safety.

The Commission does not anticipate benefits to California worker safety.

The Commission anticipates benefits to the State's environment. The proposed regulation changes are being made in order to effectively manage the red abalone fishery and maintain its sustainability. The Marine Life Management Act mandates that fisheries in California are managed sustainably. Abalone populations in California have declined and the fishery south of San Francisco was closed in 1997. The proposed regulations will benefit the abalone resource, abalone fishery and local businesses by maintaining a healthy viable fishery for years to come. Red abalone is an iconic species in California and one that is part of the state's natural heritage.

(c) Cost Impacts on a Representative Private Person or Business:

The Commission is not aware of any cost impacts that a representative private person or business would necessarily incur in reasonable compliance with the proposed action.

(d) Costs or Savings to State Agencies or Costs/Savings in Federal Funding to the State:

Unknown, however the potential exists for some loss in recreational abalone report card sales revenue if some individuals decide not to participate in the fishery due to reduced bag or annual limits.

(e) Nondiscretionary Costs/Savings to Local Agencies: None.

(f) Programs Mandated on Local Agencies or School Districts: None.

(g) Costs Imposed on any Local Agency or School District that is Required to be Reimbursed Under Part 7 (commencing with Section 17500) of Division 4, Government Code: None.

(h) Effect on Housing Costs: None.

Effect on Small Business

It has been determined that the adoption of these regulations may affect small business. The Commission has drafted the regulations in Plain English pursuant to Government Code sections 11342.580 and 11346.2(a)(1).

Consideration of Alternatives

The Commission must determine that no reasonable alternative considered by the Commission, or that has otherwise been identified and brought to the attention of the Commission, would be more effective in carrying out the purpose for which the action is proposed, would be as effective and less burdensome to affected private persons than the proposed action, or would be more cost-effective to affected private persons and equally effective in implementing the statutory policy or other provision of law.

FISH AND GAME COMMISSION

Sonke Mastrup
Executive Director

Dated: April 30, 2013