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Coastline a Top Priority, Poll Finds

A pro-environment consensus emerges as a majority of Californians support protecting the state's beaches, even if it costs them more.

By Kenneth R. Weiss

Particularly concerned about the declining condition of the coast and ocean, most Californians embrace strong environmental protections, even if those mean paying more for gasoline at the pump, more for fish at the market or making it harder to find housing, according to a poll released today.

The pro-environmental consensus was strongly bipartisan, except on one issue. Many more Democrats than Republicans said they would support a ban on more offshore oil drilling.

The telephone survey by the nonpartisan Public Policy Institute of California polled 2,004 adult residents in California between Oct. 24 and Nov. 2.

Directed by Mark Baldassare, the poll showed that a majority of state residents — 52% — consider ocean and beach pollution a big problem. More than seven out of 10 Californians are concerned about the decline in marine mammals, commercial overfishing and coastal development.

"So many people rank the coast as important to them personally, they are willing to sacrifice in ways they wouldn't do for other things," Baldassare said.

Indeed, 69% of residents said the condition of the coastline is very important to their quality of life, and 61% see it as very important to the state's economy. Nearly three out of four Californians reported visiting the coast at least several times a year. During the past year, according to the survey, 43% swam in the ocean, 17% went fishing, 14% went sailing or kayaking and 10% went surfing.

Three out of four residents support protecting the state's wetlands, beaches and bays even if that would mean less commercial or recreational activity, and 75% favor creating more marine reserves off the state's coast, even if that sets some ocean areas off-limits to commercial and recreational fishing.

Moreover, 72% favor reducing pollution from storm drains or sewage plants, even if the cost of reducing it leads to higher utility bills.

Two-thirds support restricting the sale of fish and seafood to products caught or farmed in environmentally safe manners.

Nearly 70% of Californians support limiting private development along the coast.

"If I were to look at this selfishly, I would want more development so the price could come down," said Adam Long, a computer software trouble-shooter who lives in Fullerton and cannot afford a beachfront house.

Instead, said Long, repeating what he told the pollsters, he supports strict controls on coastal development so his children will have a chance to enjoy the beach as he did. "If we continue to develop, will we even have beach access? Or will it all be sold out privately?"

One finding of the poll, however, contradicts the oft-stated assertion that the vast majority of Californians oppose oil drilling off the state's coast. Just half of those surveyed favor a ban on any new offshore drilling.

Will Dawson, a musician in Hollywood, said he doesn't believe offshore drilling poses an environmental threat, nor does he mind drilling platforms dotting the horizon. "I think lowering our dependence on foreign oil is a good thing," he said.

Almost 2-to-1 (60% to 35%), Democrats said they would be willing to pay higher gasoline prices to keep coastal waters free from more offshore drilling. But only 39% of Republicans backed a drilling ban, and 55% said they would oppose it if it led to higher gas prices.

The poll also offered report cards on President Bush and Gov.-elect Arnold Schwarzenegger.

Bush's overall approval rating stands at 48% in California. Nearly half of state residents, and a 53% majority of likely voters, expressed their disapproval of how Bush has handled national environmental issues.

The survey indicated that Californians have more faith in state officials than their federal counterparts in protecting the state's 1,100-mile coastline.

At the same time, 38% of the people surveyed believe the California Coastal Commission isn't strict enough in controlling growth along the coast.

A little more than 30% think it is handling the job about right. Only 11% of those polled believe the commission is too strict.

"What people are saying is that conditions have gotten worse, and that, if anything, they see more reason for keeping a close eye on what's going on: development and pollution," Baldassare said.

The California Supreme Court is weighing a lawsuit brought against the Coastal Commission by property rights lawyers who want to dismantle the state agency and turn over development decisions to city and county governments.

Yet, Californians, 42% to 30%, indicated that they have more confidence in state government than local government to handle marine and coastal issues.

The survey found that Californians back Schwarzenegger nearly 2-to-1, 47% to 25%. A resounding majority also said that environmental protection should be a priority for the new administration.

"Given the state of the economy, it's a huge statement that nine out of 10 Californians say environmental protection is an important priority," Baldassare said. "It's not an arena Californians think should be active for budget cuts."

Despite the state's enormous budget deficit, 48% of Californians support funding environmental programs at current levels, even at the expense of other state programs, while only 35% support reducing environmental spending.

The poll, with a margin of error of plus or minus 2 percentage points, was financed by the Hewlett, Irvine and Packard foundations.