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OPINION

Time to cast line on programs to sustain state fisheries

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There have been numerous headlines recently about oceans and fisheries in crisis. In reality, there are hundreds of fisheries in California and around the world, and they are all different. The good news about fisheries is rarely reported, but there is plenty out there. Some fisheries have indeed been exploited; others are sustainable but face economic crises due to highly restrictive regulations.

As the public increasingly embraces an ocean stewardship ethic, our nation is redefining how fisheries should be managed. California can take up this challenge and lead our nation by implementing innovative and more effective ways to govern the use of our fishery resources. Just as California is pioneering market-based solutions to limit global-warming pollution, we can apply the same principles to recover our ocean fisheries to benefit fishermen and the environment.

Promising, creative steps have already been taken. Over the past two months the California Ocean Protection Council and the California Coastal Conservancy approved $2 million to capitalize a revolving loan fund to improve the performance of ailing state fisheries. The California Fisheries Fund was developed jointly by Environmental Defense, a national non-profit environmental organization; ShoreBank Enterprise Cascadia, a community development bank; and the Sustainable Fisheries Group, a coalition of leading marine scientists, economists and ocean advocates.

In addition, more than 70 fishermen and other experts contributed to the development of the fund concept, and the fund is supported by many fishermen and community leaders from San Diego to Fort Bragg. The California Fisheries Fund will provide low-interest loans to fishermen and communities to invest in innovative and sustainable fishing practices and business models. It is expected that the fund could be increased to $17 million through public and private investments.

The California Fisheries Fund can be used strategically to invest in market-based projects in California, such as a recent partnership to buy out trawling vessels in Morro Bay. Last year, the Nature Conservancy, Environmental Defense and fishermen teamed up to coordinate a privately financed buyout of trawlers from fishermen who wanted to leave the industry. This allowed for the protection of valuable underwater habitat more than four times the size of Yosemite National Park. Now the conservation groups and fishermen are working together to build a sustainable fishery.

Catch shares are another market tool that can change the rules of the game in favor of sustainability and value. This solution involves establishing limits on the total catch of a given fishery, and then dividing up the "shares" among fishermen and others. Alternatively, the catch can be shared by designating fishing areas. As a result, fishermen have more flexibility regarding when they can catch fish - for example, when fishing conditions are favorable or when market demand is high.

Under a catch-share program fishermen can even coordinate their harvests, rather than compete with one another to maximize their catches, a practice that is wasteful for fishermen and for the fishery. In 2000 for example, the once-valuable ground fishery was declared a disaster because rockfish were depleted more rapidly than they could reproduce and too many vessels were on the water. Catch-share programs give fishermen certainty around their share of catch, allowing for fishing at a sustainable pace. Just as shares in a company become more valuable when the company is well managed, shares of a fishery become more valuable in response to conservation measures.

Market-based programs for fish can provide an economic lifeline to fishermen while helping to ensure a secure supply of fresh, local seafood that we can trust to be safe and sustainable for all Californians. Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has proven that California can lead the nation in the use of economic tools to address global warming. The governor should now encourage his state agencies to do the same for our oceans by supporting market-based solutions for ocean conservation and by renewing the state's commitment to fisheries management. If past is prologue, the rest of the nation will follow California's lead in creating waves of innovation for this precious shared resource.