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Great white sharks off the coast of California are safer, at least for now.

By Chris Palmer / February 07, 2013

California's Fish and Game Commission voted Wednesday to consider a petition to add great white sharks to the state's endangered species list.

The 4-0 vote in Sacramento immediately bestowed state protection on the sharks pending a final decision, which will come in the spring of 2014 after a year of research by the state Department of Fish and Wildlife.

State Assemblyman Paul Fong, D-Mountain View, echoed a common concern among those who favored the petition about the possible loss of one of the ocean's top predators. Fong, author of a law banning the possession and sale of shark fins, said, "The loss of the great white shark from the coast of California would not be an isolated tragedy, but may be the start

A great white shark swims in the Monterey Bay Aquarium in Monterey, Calif., in 2004. (Monterey Bay Aquarium/Randy Wilder). (RANDY WILDER) of a much larger decline of our ocean's health."

The commission also heard comments from marine biologists, fishermen and representatives of ocean advocacy groups. The majority of comments were in support of the petition, with several citing gill net fishing as a particular threat to the sharks.

Though targeting and selling great whites is already prohibited, there are now no limits on the numbers of incidental catches.

Environmental groups have been alarmed by two recent studies that have estimated the shark population, whose range extends from Mexico to Alaska to Hawaii, at 339 adults and "sub-adults"



A great white shark swims in the Monterey Bay Aquarium in Monterey, Calif., in 2004. (Monterey Bay Aquarium/Randy Wilder). (RANDY WILDER)

off the Marin County coast and Mexico, two main great white habitats.

And the number of reproductively mature females was estimated at just under 100. The estimates are far lower than researchers expected.

Other speakers at the hearing, however, raised concerns about the accuracy of the recent shark population estimates, saying they need to be compared to historic numbers to show whether the population has been increasing or decreasing.

"I think these animals are very stealthy," one fisherman said. "I don't think the count that you have is the real count."

Geoff Shester, California program director of Oceana, one of the three ocean advocacy groups that sponsored the petition, admitted there is

uncertainty in the estimated population. But, he said, “even if numbers are two to three times the current estimates, these are still extremely low numbers, presenting an inherent extinction risk.”

Ultimately, the commission decided not to take any chances and to study the issue more thoroughly.

“White sharks are iconic ocean creatures,” said Michael Sutton, who on Wednesday was elected commission president by his colleagues. “As the ocean’s top predators, they deserve all the protection we can afford them.

“The status review will give us better information on the white shark population off the West Coast and threats to its survival,” he said. “That will give us the ability to make an informed decision about whether or not to list the white shark as endangered under California law.”

In 1994, Gov. Pete Wilson banned the hunting of great white sharks up to three miles offshore. And in 2011, Gov. Jerry Brown signed Fong’s shark-fin bill. But both bans have loopholes that allow the sharks to be killed accidentally when caught in the gill nets that some fishermen use to catch halibut.

The move to consider the petition closes that loophole somewhat by requiring gill net fishermen to apply for “incidental take permits” within 90 days or risk being shut down.

Many of the public commenters and some commissioners said that in addition to protection from the state of California, great sharks need more protection in Mexico. And Sutton said an important part of a status review would be to “get a handle on what’s going on south of the border.”

The other two environmental groups that filed the petition were Stewards and the Center for Biological Diversity.

Along with Oceana, the groups have also filed a petition with the National Marine Fisheries Service, which will decide next summer whether to include great whites on the federal endangered species list.