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News Release



For Release on October 5, 2005
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05-120

U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE PROPOSES THAT SOUTHERN SEA OTTER TRANSLOCATION PROGRAM BE TERMINATED

Service recommends sea otters remain in south coast waters

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is seeking public comments on a proposal to formally end the 18-year-old California sea otter translocation program following an in-depth evaluation that found the program is not meeting its objectives for restoring the species.

The Service is also proposing to allow the approximately 30 southern sea otters resident at San Nicolas Island to stay there. Under the Service's proposal, these animals will no longer be considered part of an experimental population and will be protected as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act, as is the rest of California's sea otter population.

"Many of the sea otters we moved to San Nicolas Island had a plan of their own and swam back to the central coast of California" said Steve Thompson, manager for the Fish and Wildlife Service's California-Nevada Operations Office. "We believe that continuing the translocation program will not promote recovery of the species."

Following an evaluation of the translocation program, the Service made its conclusion and recommendation to terminate the program in a draft supplement to an environmental impact statement, which also evaluates several other alternatives.

The Service is seeking public comment on the draft supplement until Jan. 5, 2006. Oral and written comments will be accepted at public hearings that will be held from 6 to 9 p.m. on Tuesday, Nov. 1, 2005, in Santa Barbara at the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History, Auditorium; 2559 Puesta del Sol Road, and Thursday, Nov. 3, 2005, in Monterey at the Monterey Bay Aquarium, Auditorium; 886 Cannery Row. Written comments can be submitted to: Greg Sanders, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 2493 Portola Road, Suite B; Ventura, CA 93003-7726, or sent via email to fwlseaotterseis@fws.gov. The SEIS can be obtained at the address above or it can be downloaded from the Internet at <http://ventura.fws.gov>. The notice of availability for the supplement will be published in the Federal Register on Oct. 7, 2005.

The purpose of the translocation program, which began in 1987, was to establish a colony of southern sea otters outside their existing range to boost recovery of the species and to protect against the possibility that a natural or human-caused event – such as an oil spill – would devastate the main population of otters. As part of this

program, 140 otters were moved to San Nicolas Island, one of the Channel Islands in Southern California, from the main population of otters, which resides between Half Moon Bay and Point Conception. Contrary to expectations, an independent population of sea otters failed to become established. The San Nicolas Island otter colony now numbers about 30 animals.

Southern sea otters (*Enhydra lutris nereis*), the smallest of marine mammals found in U.S. waters, may live for up to 15 years and feed primarily on a variety of large invertebrates, including sea urchins, abalone, rock crabs, kelp crabs, and clams. Their use of tools to break open their food makes them unique among marine mammals. Most adult female sea otters give birth to one pup each year. Southern sea otters depend on clean, water-resistant fur – about one million hairs per square inch – for insulation against cold ocean water. Due to their small body size and lack of blubber, sea otters must stay warm by producing a high level of internal heat. To satisfy their high energy requirements, sea otters spend the majority of their time foraging for food and eat an average of 25% of their body weight each day.

The southern sea otter once ranged from Oregon south to Baja California, Mexico. During the 18th and 19th centuries, otters were hunted for their luxurious pelts; by the early 1900s the species was nearly extinct, with only a small remnant colony surviving off the Big Sur coast. This key species in the California marine ecosystem was listed as threatened in 1977 under the Endangered Species Act and is considered a depleted species under the Marine Mammal Protection Act. Today there are approximately 2,700 sea otters ranging from Half Moon Bay to Point Conception off the coast of central and southern California. A revised recovery plan for the southern sea otter, released in 2003, describes a strategy of determining the causes of the increased mortality that is slowing natural range expansion and recovery.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System, which encompasses 545 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 64 Fish and Wildlife Management offices and 81 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign and Native American tribal governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Assistance program, which distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.

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