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Should the feds drop poison on Farallon Islands to destroy invasive mice? Controversial plan goes to vote this week

 **Tara Duggan**

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An ashy storm-petrel at the South Farallon Islands.

Joey Negreann/Point Blue Conservation Science

For boaters approaching the steep, rocky shoreline, the South Farallon Islands appear to be a dominion of preening pelicans, barking sea lions and other native seabirds and pinnipeds.

But in the middle of this wilderness 27 miles offshore from San Francisco is an invader introduced by humans long ago: European house mice. In such high numbers that they make the ground quiver, the rodents attract owls that prey on a rare seabird, the ashy storm-petrel, leaving only piles of feathers behind. That's led wildlife officials to devise a plan to get rid of the mice by dropping about 3,000 pounds of poisoned bait on the islands, promising minimal harm to wildlife.

The California Coastal Commission will vote on the latest version of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's mouse eradication plan Thursday. If it approves the plan, it would then need to be green-lighted by the regional director of U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and would likely be implemented in the fall of 2023 at the soonest.

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“This is a jewel of the Pacific,” said Gerry McChesney, manager of the Farallon Islands National Wildlife Refuge, the largest seabird nesting spot in the lower 48 states, with up to 350,000 birds and 13 species. “The mice were introduced by humans, and it’s our responsibility to do whatever we can to right that wrong — to restore this ecosystem so it can be back in balance.”

Fish and Wildlife introduced a version of the poison drop plan, in the works since 2004, to the California Coastal Commission in 2019, and then removed it from consideration after the commission asked for additional details. The federal agency’s latest [proposal to the Coastal Commission](#) goes into more specifics about how the helicopter drop would happen and how wildlife would be monitored afterward. It is supported by dozens of conservation organizations, including the National Audubon Society and the Nature Conservancy.

“We wanted to make sure we didn’t leave any stone unturned,” McChesney said. “We know it’s a controversial project in the Bay Area.”

Critics — including other environmental groups like Sierra Club California and Friends of the Earth — say blanketing a wildlife refuge with a potent rodenticide is too risky.

“This has never been a noncontroversial issue,” said Richard Charter, senior fellow at the Ocean Foundation, who helped coordinate the founding of the Gulf of the Farallones National Marine Sanctuary that surrounds the four groups of Farallon Islands. “This is the worst possible persistent ecosystem poison, in the wrong biological system, in the middle of the most protected piece of ocean on the planet.”

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U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service counters that the benefits of the plan far outweigh the risks. The poison drop would happen in fall, outside nesting season, and staff would use hazing practices to scare away seagulls. They point to successful rodent eradications on other pristine islands, such as California's Channel Islands and [the Galapagos](#), and the fact that the invasive mice also prey on other species endemic to the islands, the Farallon arboreal salamander and the Farallon camel cricket.

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The poisoned bait breaks down and has been shown to become undetectable within months in the soil at other restoration sites where it has been used, Fish and Wildlife said.

“There are lots of reasons to support it. It’s needed to help preserve the wildlife and the unique ecosystem that is the Farallones,” said Pete Warzybok, Farallon Islands program leader at Point Blue Conservation Science, which conducts biological research on the islands. “The longer we go without doing something to rectify the situation, the more harm it’s going to have.”

During fall, their peak season, the mice can reach a population of 60,000, or about 500 per acre.

“Especially at night, you’ll see them hopping around all over the place and excavating their burrows,” said Warzybok, who has spent many months of each of the past 22 years on the islands. “It looks like the ground is moving.”

Likely brought over by Russian fur traders in the early 1800s, the mice attract burrowing owls that prey on them until their population drops in winter, and then move on to the ashy storm-petrel, a species of special concern in California. Half of the global population of 10,000 ashy storm-petrels nest on the Farallones, a number expected to drop by 63% in 20 years if the mice aren't dealt with, according to [a 2019 study by Point Blue](#). Recent observations from Point Blue biologists broadly confirm that population decline.

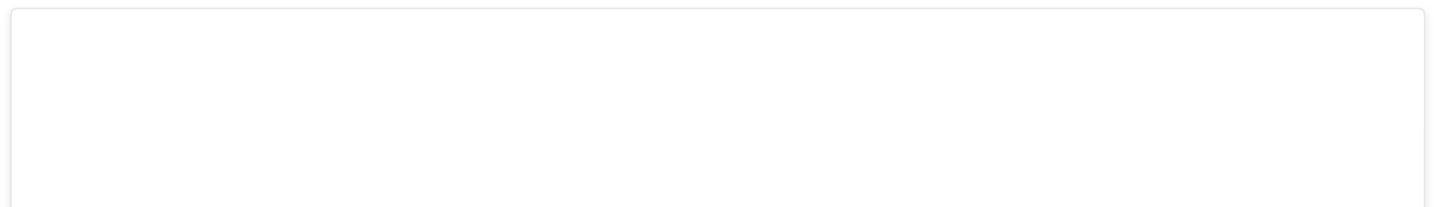
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's eradication plan starts with a hazing process to scare off the Western gulls that spend time on the islands in the fall. In tests McChesney and other staff conducted, one of the most effective ways to do that is to hang the bodies of dead gulls up on stakes like effigies, which keeps them away for days or weeks.

"In very plain terms, it freaks 'em out," said McChesney.

In the next phase, helicopters would drop the cereal pellets, containing 0.0025% percent of the rodenticide brodifacoum, thoroughly over the islands. They'd repeat the drop again 10 to 21 days later.

Wildlife staff would collect mouse carcasses to prevent them from getting eaten by birds of prey. Because the poison takes a while to kill the mice, McChesney expects most of them would head to their burrows and die underground.

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Some gulls would also eat the pellets and die. The agency expects the number killed to be well below 1,050, which is the most the population could lose without being impacted, according to the project's environmental impact statement. Wildlife staff would manually pick up uneaten pellets after 10 days.

Critics like Charter say many more gulls could be harmed and question the need to use brodifacoum, an anticoagulant that causes internal bleeding that can drag out for weeks. Its use has been restricted in California after it was found widely in predators like mountain lions and spotted owls.

Instead, he and others who oppose the poison plan argue for holding out for a more humane alternative coming in the near future: a mouse contraceptive.

"It's not a question of if contraceptives will be a replacement for poison, it's a question of when," said Loretta Mayer of [FYXX Foundation](#). The nonprofit research organization is developing a contraceptive for mice that's already in commercial use on rats, and it could be ready for testing in one to two years, Mayer said.

Mayer also argued that contraceptives are more effective than poison, which must kill every last breeding pair to be effective.

eliminate the population and would have to be repeated multiple times. McChesney also said brodifacoum has been used effectively in all but one of the 64 successful island mouse eradications worldwide.

For Warzybok, who has spent so much time on the largest of the South Farallon Islands among the fur and elephant seals, ashy storm-petrels, common murre and puffins, the mouse poison plan is the only way forward, despite the controversy around it.

"The first time I went out there I fell in love with the majesty and diversity of the island," he said. "I feel very strongly about doing what is best for it."

Chronicle staff writer Yoohyun Jung contributed to this story

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Reach Tara on

Tara Duggan has written for The San Francisco Chronicle since 1999. Previously part of the Food+Wine department, she currently is on the Climate desk covering environmental aspects of agriculture, food and the ocean, among other topics. She is also coauthor of the upcoming "Steamed: A Catharsis Cookbook" (April 2021) along with other cookbooks including "The Working Cook," "Root to Stalk Cooking" and "The Blue Bottle Craft of Coffee." Her writing and recipes have also appeared in the New York Times, Food & Wine Magazine and the Wall Street Journal.

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