

MEMORANDUM

TO: Council, SSC and AP Members

FROM: Chris Oliver *Chris*  
Executive Director

ESTIMATED TIME 6 hrs all B items
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DATE: March 23, 2004

SUBJECT: Update on Sea Otters

**ACTION REQUIRED**

Receive report from the US Fish & Wildlife Service on the status of listing the southwest Alaska Distinct Population Segment of the northern sea otter under the Endangered Species Act

**BACKGROUND**

The northern sea otter population in Alaska is comprised of three stocks, one of which, the southwest Alaska stock [see map, Item B-6(a)], called a Distinct Population Segment or DPS, has been declining in abundance over recent years. The reasons for the decline of the southwest Alaska DPS are unknown, but population studies indicate that increased adult mortality appears to be the source. Groundfish fisheries are not known to interact with sea otters, but this marine mammal does inhabit coastal areas near some fishing areas and ports. The southwest Alaska sea otter DPS inhabits coastal Alaska from the Cook Inlet/Kodiak area westward to the end of the Aleutian Islands.

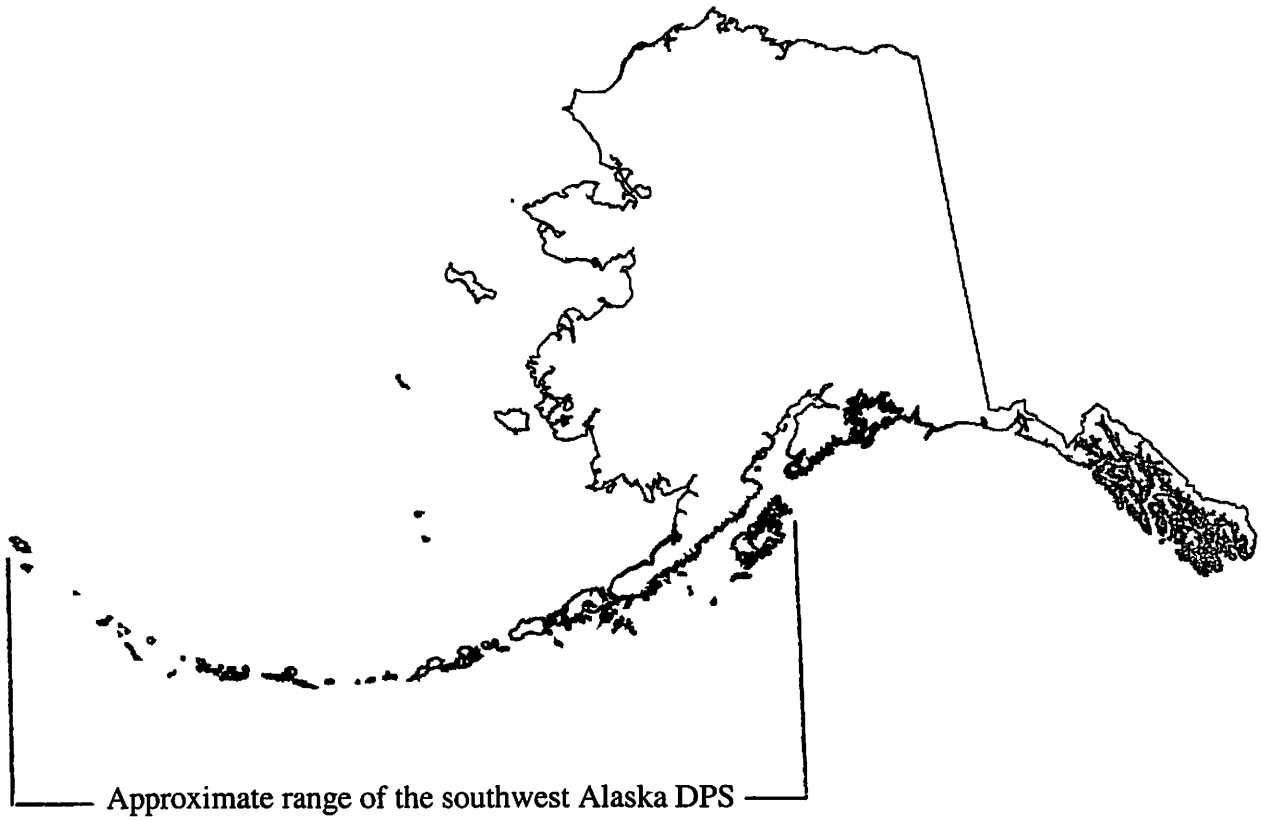
At the February Council meeting, the USFWS reported that the agency had published a Proposed Rule (69 FR 6600; Feb. 11, 2004) to list the southwest Alaska DPS as threatened under the Endangered Species Act. In the Federal Register notice, the USFWS requests comments from the public concerning:

- Relevant biological or other data concerning any threat, or lack thereof, to this DPS
- The location of any additional populations of this DPS
- Physical or biological features or geographic areas the agency should consider in defining critical habitat, and any features or areas that should not be designated critical habitat
- Additional information on the range, distribution, and size of this DPS
- Current or planned activities in the areas inhabited by this DPS and their possible impacts on this DPS

Comments are due by June 10, 2004. The USFWS, Alaska Region, news release on the listing is attached as Item B-6(b).

Although it is unlikely that Alaska EEZ groundfish fisheries will be considered a threat to this population, the Council may wish to comment on the proposed listing. A representative from the USFWS will be available to discuss the status of the proposed ESA listing, and to answer questions.

Distribution of the northern sea otter in Alaska.





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**News**

04-03

For Immediate Release

Contact: Bruce Woods (907) 786-3695

## **U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE PROPOSES LISTING SOUTHWEST ALASKA SEA OTTERS AS "THREATENED" UNDER ENDANGERED SPECIES ACT**

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is proposing to list the southwest Alaska Distinct Population Segment of the northern sea otter (*Enhydra lutris kenyoni*) as threatened under the Endangered Species Act (ESA.) A Proposed Rule regarding the listing was published today in the Federal Register. The Service will accept comments on the proposed rule for the next 120 days.

"We are proposing to list the sea otter population in southwest Alaska based on survey data indicating that it has declined dramatically over the last 10 to 15 years," said Rowan Gould, Regional Director of the Service's Alaska Region. "This population, which once contained more than half of the world's sea otters, has declined at least 56 to 68 percent since the mid-1980s and we have no indications that the decline has ceased."

Under the ESA, "species" is defined broadly to include species, subspecies, and also to include Distinct Population Segments, or DPS, of vertebrate species. A DPS is a portion of a vertebrate species or subspecies that is discrete from the remainder of its taxon and also is significant to that taxon. The ESA defines a "threatened" species as one that is likely to become endangered in the foreseeable future. An "endangered" species is defined as being in danger of extinction throughout all or a significant portion of its range.

The proposed rule describes the southwest Alaska DPS of the northern sea otter as occurring in nearshore waters from the Aleutian Islands to Cook Inlet, including waters adjacent to the Aleutians, the Alaska Peninsula, and the Kodiak archipelago. This corresponds to the range of the southwest stock of sea otters recognized in 2002 by the Service in accordance with provisions of the Marine Mammal Protection Act. Two other stocks of sea otters in Alaska that also were recognized in 2002, the southcentral and southeast stocks, are believed to be stable or increasing and are not included in the proposed rule published today.

Between the mid 1700s and the early 1900s, commercial hunting of sea otters brought the entire species to the brink of extinction. When they became protected from commercial harvest in 1911 under the International Fur Seal Treaty, only 13 small remnant populations were known to still exist, including six in southwest Alaska. Following this protection, otters from 11 of these populations gradually recovered and re-colonized their former range in southwest Alaska and some other portions of their historic range.

A substantial decline in the southwest Alaska otter population appears to have begun in the mid- to late 1980s. In the Aleutians, there were approximately 55,000 to 74,000 sea otters in the mid-1980s, representing almost half of the world's estimated population of sea otters at that time. Aerial surveys since that time, however, indicate a progressive decline in the number of otters in the Aleutians, where the current population is estimated to be less than 9,000 animals. Survey results also show substantial declines have occurred in the Alaska Peninsula, where the counts of otters have declined by more than 65 percent since the mid 1980s. In the Kodiak Archipelago, surveys indicate the number of otters has declined more than 55 percent since the

late 1980s. Overall, the DPS has declined an estimated 56 to 68 percent over the past 10 to 15 years, and recent surveys indicate the decline is continuing.

The cause of the population decline is not clear. Production of young does not appear to be reduced, nor is there evidence that starvation, disease, or contaminants are involved. There also is no evidence that entanglement in commercial fishing gear or competition with fishermen for prey species is playing a significant role in the decline, and annual subsistence harvest by Alaska Natives is believed to be too low to contribute significantly to the decline. Some evidence points to predation by killer whales as a possible cause of the decline in the Aleutian Island chain. However, additional research will be needed before we can confidently identify the cause of the decline.

The proposed rule to list the southwest DPS of the otter as threatened does not include a proposal for designating critical habitat. As explained in the proposed rule, critical habitat is not determinable at this time. As part of the request for public comments on the proposal to list the DPS, the Service is seeking information regarding features and specific areas that the Service should consider for a critical habitat proposal, in the event that the listing becomes final. If the Service does propose critical habitat for the DPS in the future, the public would have an opportunity to comment on such a proposal.

If the southwest Alaska DPS of the sea otter is listed as threatened under the ESA, a recovery plan would be developed for it. This plan would bring together efforts by Federal, State, Alaska Native groups, local agencies, and private entities for the conservation of the DPS.

The Service invites the public to submit data, information, and comments on the proposed rule. The Service will accept comments on the proposed rule for the next 120 days, and during that time the Service also will hold one or more public hearings where the public can obtain information and offer comments. Requests for public hearings need to be received by the Service within the next 60 days. A copy of the proposed rule and other information about the proposal is available on the Internet at <http://alaska.fws.gov/current.htm>. Comments on the proposal can be emailed to [fw7\\_swakseotter@fws.gov](mailto:fw7_swakseotter@fws.gov).

You can subscribe to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Alaska Region listserv to have our press releases sent to your e-mail address automatically by sending a message to: [listserv@www.fws.gov](mailto:listserv@www.fws.gov). Please indicate that you would like to subscribe to FWS-Alaska news and give your name in the body of the message.

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 542 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resource 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 governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.

- FWS

*For more information about the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service,  
visit our home page at <http://www.fws.gov>*