

## **Key Sea Otter Concerns**

### **Current Situation**

Sea otters are a threatened species under the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA). The **Fish and Wildlife Service** (FWS) is now proposing to abandon a 20 year sea otter management program mandated by Congress, by changing to a “no management” program which would allow sea otters to go wherever they want.

### **Results of Abandonment**

As a result, the FWS proposal will lead to the destruction of valuable California commercial and recreational fishing interests with potential devastating job and economic losses. Also the consumer will be faced with less seafood choices. For example, in 1999, when sea otters expanded their range without restriction, the commercial sea urchin harvest was devastated, falling over 95% in only one year in the area of expansion.

### **Conflict with Sea Otters Inevitable**

Whenever sea otters have been allowed to go wherever they want, they have changed the ecosystem in surprising and unexpected ways. Unmanaged sea otter range expansion will almost certainly threaten the existence of the endangered white abalone and may also cause the black abalone to be added to the list of endangered species.

### **Unbalanced Resource Management**

The failure to adequately address the effects of unmanaged sea otter range expansion on shellfish and other species is inconsistent with the requirements of the National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA) and sets the stage for irresponsible and unbalanced management of important ocean resources.

### **Actual Threats to Sea Otters Not Being Addressed**

Unmanaged populations of sea otters ignores the real problem. With a current population of 2,800 and delisting number of 3,090, approximately 200 sea otters are dying annually most likely from pollutant discharges and poor water quality. If this problem was solved, the sea otter could be off the endangered list in two years.

### **FWS Violating its Own Regulations**

Its own regulations requires that if FWS ends the current management program, the experimental population of sea otters at San Nicolas Island (SNI) must be moved back to the mainland. FWS now proposes to officially end the management program but leave the experimental population in place. This would presumably be done by rewriting the regulations and continuing to ignore the spirit of the law. This is now justified by concluding that relocating the sea otter is a primary threat to their survival.

## **Frequently Asked Questions**

### **What Is the FSOCC?**

The Fisheries and Sea Otter Conservation Coalition (FSOCC) includes commercial and recreational fishing organizations dedicated to achieving balanced management of fishing activities (both commercial and recreational) and sea otters.

### **Who Are the Members of the FSOCC Coalition?**

The members include: California Sea Urchin Commission, California Trap and Lobster Association, Ventura County Commercial Fisherman's Association, California Wetfish Producers Association, Southern California Trawlers Association, West Coast Seafood Processors Association, Los Angeles Commercial Fishermen's Association, Recreational Fishing Alliance, and California Abalone Association.

### **What Is the FSOCC's Objective?**

The FSOCC's primary goal is to protect the livelihoods of people in commercial fishing, the interests of recreational fishing, marine ecosystems and other marine species, while at the same time protecting sea otters which are threatened under the federal Endangered Species Act.

### **Why Does the Fishing Industry Need Protection?**

The commercial fishing industry provides thousands of jobs, fresh local seafood, income to local tourism businesses through retail sales, and also value to the cultural heritage of our coastal communities.

### **What Is the Current Situation Regarding the Fishing Industry and the Sea Otter?**

For nearly 25 years the Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) followed a policy of managing sea otters while protecting economic fishing activities. It is now moving to abandon a sea otter management program mandated by Congress, by changing to a "no management" program which would allow sea otters to go wherever they want, decimating many commercially important fished species.

### **Why Would a No Management Program for the Sea Otter Be a Problem for the Fishing Industry?**

Sea urchins and many other fish/shellfish are a prime food source for the sea otter and many fished species cannot exist in marketable quantities where sea otters are present. With a "no management" program, as proposed by the FWS, sea otters would be allowed to "go wherever they want" leading to the destruction of valuable California commercial and recreational fishing businesses.

### **Is There an Example of Sea Otters Wiping Out A Fish Population?**

Yes, in 1999, when sea otters expanded their range without restriction south of Point Conception, the commercial sea urchin harvest was devastated, falling by more than 95% in only one year within the area of expansion. Continued expansion would have potential devastating job and economic losses. In addition, consumers would be faced with fewer seafood choices.

### **How Does the Sea Urchin Industry Protect a Healthy Ocean?**

Sea urchins are harvested by licensed divers who hand pick each urchin for its size, maturity and quality, there is no by-catch or unwanted fish taken. It is not a random bulk process leaving insufficient numbers behind to ensure reproduction. The number of sea urchins harvested is driven by the demand of the consumer. Well regulated sea urchin harvesting helps to protect kelp forests, critical to many marine species, from being overly consumed by sea urchin.

### **Who Works for the Sea Urchin Industry?**

The industry includes licensed independent divers, small business seafood processors, and many small business suppliers.

### **When Is the Sea Urchin Fishing Season and How Many Can Each Diver Harvest?**

Harvesting sea urchin is regulated by both season and size. A minimum size is set to ensure that sea urchins reach maturity and are able to spawn before being harvested. Sea urchins can be harvested anytime during November through March. During the remainder of the year harvesting is limited to certain days of the week.

There is no regulated limit to the number of sea urchins a diver may harvest. In practice the amount of sea urchin harvested is limited by the market demand, processors coordinate with divers to ensure that sea urchin that cannot be sold are not harvested.

### **What Is the Economic Value of the Sea Urchin Fishing Industry?**

Over the past 7 yrs (1999-2005) an average of 13 million lbs of sea urchins have been harvested annually in California, producing approx 910,000 lbs of uni/roe. In the most recent years (2003-05) the average was down a bit to 11.5 million lbs, resulting in approx 805,000 lbs of roe. Approx 30% is used domestically and the balance is shipped to Japan. Most of the top grade (California Gold) is used domestically getting a better wholesale price. It is estimated the 2005 domestic wholesale value was approximately \$9.2 million and the export value was \$8.3 million.