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**New Sea Otter Recovery Efforts Defended by Wildlife Groups**

*Sea Urchin Industry Wants to Eradicate Otters From Parts of Calif. Coast*

MONTEREY, Calif.—Conservation and wildlife groups announced today that they intend to defend a decision by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to end a failed policy of trying to exclude sea otters from their Southern California habitat — a so-called “no-otter zone” — by relocating otters to other areas. An industry group, the California Sea Urchin Commission, filed a lawsuit today challenging the federal decision to end the backward management policy.

Congress established the “no-otter” zone (Public Law 99-625) in 1986 as part of a plan by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to translocate sea otters to San Nicolas Island. At the time the agency suggested that the translocation program would help southern sea otters, which are protected as a “threatened” species under the Endangered Species Act, to gain protection should a catastrophic event like an oil spill threaten the otter population along parts of the California coast. The “no-otter” zone was established by Congress in response to complaints from fishermen that moving otters to a new location could interfere with their fishing activities.

The translocation program ultimately fell short of expectations because not enough otters remained at San Nicolas Island to establish a viable population. Many relocated otters swam back to their waters of origin; others died from being captured or transported. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service subsequently determined that enforcing the no-otter zone would hurt sea otters’ protection and recovery, and the agency decided in 2003 that allowing otters to expand to their natural, historical range south of Point Conception would be necessary to achieve recovery of the species.

But that decision is now being challenged by the California Sea Urchin Commission, an organization that represents urchin harvesters and views sea otters as competitors. While sea otters do enjoy urchins, they also eat clams, mussels, mollusks, crustaceans and snails. Also, their fondness for eating urchins and other invertebrates helps keep these populations in check and prevents them from mowing down kelp forest habitat.

“It is just another attempt by a segment of the fishing community to prevent sea otter recovery to advance their narrow economic self-interest, even at the expense of the benefits to the California coastal ecosystem,” said Jim Curland, advocacy program
director at Friends of the Sea Otter. “As it has many times before, Friends of the Sea Otter will again take all actions necessary to meet this legal threat.”

“It’s plain to see that you can’t prohibit sea otters from using their ocean habitat without hurting or killing them. The no-otter zone was a no-good plan, and this lawsuit trying to get it reinstated it is a big step backward,” said Miyoko Sakashita, oceans director at the Center for Biological Diversity.

The population of California sea otters before fur traders arrived is believed to have been between 14,000 and 16,000. But in 2012 the animals’ three-year population average was only 2,792.

“We should celebrate every nook and cranny where California sea otters make a go at repopulating our coast. Rather than waste its resources on a program that wasn’t working, the Fish and Wildlife Service made the only sensible and lawful decision to allow otters to go where they need to go to eat, mate, and raise their young,” said Andrea Treece of Earthjustice, who is representing the coalition.

Friends of the Sea Otter is committed to and advocates for the conservation of sea otters and the preservation of their habitat, through education, research, and policy decisions that will ensure the long-term survival of this species.

Earthjustice is a nonprofit public interest law organization dedicated to protecting the magnificent places, natural resources, and wildlife of this earth, and to defending the right of all people to a healthy environment.

The Center for Biological Diversity is a national, nonprofit conservation organization with more than 500,000 members and online activists dedicated to the protection of endangered species and wild places. www.biologicaldiversity.org