



**Statement of
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Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife and Oceans
House Natural Resources Committee
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Good morning, Chairwoman Bordallo, Ranking Member Brown, Members of the Subcommittee, and staff. Thank you very much for the opportunity to testify on "The Southern Sea Otter Recovery and Research Act" (H.R. 3639).

My name is Jim Curland and I am the marine program associate for Defenders of Wildlife. I am based in the Monterey Bay area in California and have been working on sea otter conservation issues for 10 years and studied sea otters as part of my graduate work another 9 years before that. Defenders of Wildlife is dedicated to the protection and restoration of native animals and plants in their natural communities. We represent more than 1 million members and supporters nationwide.

While I am here as a representative of Defenders, I am also here representing a coalition of conservation groups that work on sea otter conservation issues: Friends of the Sea Otter, The Humane Society of the United States, The Ocean Conservancy, and Oceans Public Trust Initiative, a project of Earth Island Institute's International Marine Mammal Project.

This hearing highlights the importance of pending federal legislation, which, if enacted, would provide critical funding for the recovery of the southern, or California sea otter. Over the last five years, the need for this legislation has only grown stronger. In my testimony, I will briefly review the threats to sea otters, why the legislation is necessary, and why existing programs are insufficient to meet these needs.

The southern sea otter has had a rocky road back from the brink of extinction, and recovery is still elusive for this imperiled species, which is classified as "threatened" under the Endangered Species Act and "depleted" under the Marine Mammal Protection Act.

The sea otter faces a variety of threats in California, which includes food limitations, disease, habitat degradation, potential entrapment in fishing gear, and, potentially, other influences that are impacting this population. In addition, oil spills are an ever-present threat. These and other threats are not fully understood, and so research to better comprehend them is critical.

Unfortunately, the path to secure funding necessary to further research and conservation for the sea otter has been as rocky and elusive as the path to sea otter recovery. The conservation community has been working to protect and conserve sea otters for 40 years, and we represent more than ten million members. Our organizations strongly support H.R. 3639 and believe that passage of this legislation is vital to the implementation of the Southern Sea Otter Recovery Plan.

As determined by the Southern Sea Otter Recovery Team and set forth in the Recovery Plan, sea otter population growth and range expansion are needed for recovery. Over the last decade, southern sea otters have experienced sluggish to no population growth. During this period, in four of these years, the year-end mortality rate has been at its highest since the bi-annual census began over 25 years ago.

H.R. 3639 would support the research needed both to 1) identify the reasons why a species that appeared to be on the way to recovery has effectively ceased to improve in its condition, and (2) recommend remedial courses of action.

Unfortunately, funding for research and recovery efforts has been woefully inadequate.

Concern for the welfare of southern sea otters and the health of the nearshore marine environment prompted the development of this bill. By consulting constituents and stakeholders, Congressman Farr identified the need to secure funding to support sea otter recovery and research initiatives, develop an organizational framework to grant monies for sea otter research and recovery, and create a structure to implement the Recovery Plan.

Our organizations strongly support the research emphasis of H.R. 3639.

Funding, however, under the existing authorities has been insufficient and is declining, and does not even come close to the necessary level. My submitted written testimony will detail these funding shortfalls.

Without this bill, the prospects for future funding are uncertain and inadequate. Congressman Farr's bill would accomplish all of these results.

Some critics of the legislation maintain that it is not necessary, and that all of the actions called for in H.R. 3639 can be achieved either through the ESA or the MMPA. However, it is clear that those authorities have not, and cannot, be used to establish a competitive research and recovery grant program, a scientific oversight committee, and a mechanism for stakeholder involvement in research, which the bill will provide.

In conclusion, Madame Chair, while a great deal of good work is ongoing, the federal and state sea otter programs are limited in their ability to make meaningful progress toward recovery.

The efforts to recover the southern sea otter will continue in fits and starts until we secure a more stable funding base for the identified research that is essential to many of these actions. Congressman Farr's Southern Sea Otter Recovery and Research Act will provide that secure funding for essential research and free up existing funds for other sea otter conservation purposes. Enactment of H.R. 3639 will greatly facilitate sea otter recovery, and the overall California marine ecosystem will benefit from this effort.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify on this important issue. I will be happy to answer any questions you may have.