

COUNTY OF SONOMA
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October 28, 2022

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Paul Souza, Regional Director - Pacific Southwest
2800 Cottage Way, Suite W-2606
Sacramento, CA 95825
Via email: paul_souza@fws.gov

RE: Sea Otter Feasibility Study

Director Souza,

On behalf of the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors, I am writing in appreciation of the recent U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service report, Sea Otter Feasibility Assessment ("the Report"), which determined that sea otter reintroduction was feasible in a variety of areas along the Pacific Coast of the United States, including the San Francisco Bay Area, a former habitat range for sea otters; the Report emphasized the importance of estuarine habitat, and discussed the importance of reestablishing sea otters in the gap between the northern sea otter range in Washington state and the north end of the southern sea otter range in California.

The Report details the numerous benefits that species reintroduction would offer such as ecosystem resilience, biodiversity enhancement and carbon sequestration, among other things. We look forward to the future workshops and studies outlined in the report to engage on this important issue.

Sonoma County is in the process of revising and approving our Local Coastal Plan. Throughout the revision process, the County has worked to pave the way for sea otter reintroduction by including language that prioritizes and encourages marine ecosystem restoration. Research and conservation are key priorities for the County. Accordingly, we've worked hard to develop very strong partnerships with organizations like the Bodega Marine Laboratory to ensure the effectiveness of current and future marine conservation efforts.

From an ecological perspective, Sonoma County's numerous estuaries and bays are highly suitable sites for sea otter reintroduction. After reintroduction, sea otter migration is uncertain, but Sonoma County has the capacity to manage that uncertainty by forming a tri-county partnership with Mendocino and Marin Counties. Sonoma County has strong existing relationships with neighboring counties, particularly when it comes to issues on the coast. For instance, Marin, Sonoma, and Mendocino Counties recently launched a coordinated campaign to provide visitor education and outreach to reduce the amount of litter and waste in coastal regions and watersheds through a three-County memorandum of understanding with the non-profit Leave No Trace.

Sonoma County values ecotourism and education. We are in the process of converting a Parks Department facility into a public education center. This center, or one like it, could be a hub for the public to learn about how to support endangered marine ecosystems. The County's kelp forest has been devastated and sea otters would help reduce the impact climate change could have in these kelp forest ecosystems. The County has strong

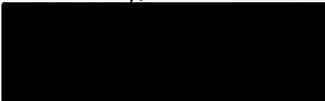
relationships to local tribal communities (Kashia and Graton Rancheria), who have expressed interest in reintroducing sea otters in Sonoma County.

We recognize the real and perceived impact of reintroducing sea otters, as well as the pushback that would likely come from the Sonoma County fishing community. That said, we are prepared to partner with local fisheries to discuss a realistic impact timeline. We are also prepared to identify ways to redistribute funds from increased ecotourism back to fisheries if they are indeed impacted. We already have several mechanisms (e.g., Transient Occupancy Taxes) that could financially support this type of financial impact mitigation.

To advance the public conversation around reintroducing sea otters on the Sonoma Coast, I invite the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service to visit our county and convene a set of structured workshops and stakeholder discussions with key scientific experts and regional partner agencies. We would be excited to support such a convening. We would also like to explore with you a process to: (1) initiate a rigorous socioeconomic impact study on the benefits of species reintroduction here in Sonoma County; (2) develop plans for ecological restoration projects that support species habitat and climate resilience; (3) establish a partnership that would include USFW, the County, leaders from coastal Tribes, and others from the state and region to identify sites for piloting reintroduction as part of a comprehensive interagency plan; and (4) develop principles on implementation of equitable public access and educational opportunities for the people of the North Bay counties.

Climate action is a priority of the County Legislative Platform and the County's 5-year strategic plan. Reintroducing sea otters to areas where they historically lived but are currently absent could help restore functioning coastal ecosystems by enhancing ecosystem resilience, biodiversity, carbon sequestration, and resilience to the effects of climate change. If you have any questions about our request, and to initiate work on the convening, please feel free to contact Barbara Lee, Director of Climate Action and Resiliency, at Barbara.Lee@sonoma-county.org, or (707) 483-5323.

Sincerely,



JAMES GORE, Chair
Sonoma County Board of Supervisors

CC: Sonoma County Board of Supervisors