



The Otter Project

www.otterproject.org

March 31, 2008

Assemblymember Dave Jones
State Capitol
P.O. Box 942849
Sacramento, CA 94249-0009

Assemblymember John Laird
State Capitol
P.O. Box 942849
Sacramento, CA 94249-0027

Dear Assembly Members Jones and Laird:

We are writing today to express our thanks for your continued involvement in sea otters and the health of our ocean, and to suggest how proceeds from the sea otter tax check-off can be used to maximum benefit.

The Otter Project actively participated in the crafting of AB 2485. At the time, we suggested very slightly modifying the language by adding 'recovery' to the bill so that it was explicit that monies could be used for sea otter recovery in addition to basic research. We were assured the provision stating "research and programs related to sea otters" adequately covered our concerns. Further, we asked that there be some provision insuring that the fifty-percent split given to the Department of Fish and Game would be used for new research and recovery efforts and not simply to back-fill their existing operations. These changes were not made, but The Otter Project continued to support the bill with letters of support and member action alerts.

On March 28th the Sea Otter Research Alliance (US Geological Survey, CA Department of Fish and Game, UC Davis, UC Santa Cruz, Monterey Bay Aquarium) and Defenders of Wildlife met with the Coastal Conservancy to suggest that all proceeds for the next three years (approximately \$375,000) be used to support further research. The proposed research effort is \$3 million over three years; the Research Alliance did not specify where the balance of the additional funds would come from. As feared, Fish and Game reported that their share of check-off monies are being used to back-fill their existing program. Although The Otter Project was not invited to earlier planning meetings, we were invited and present at this final meeting and we expressed our feeling that monies should be equitably distributed between research *and* recovery efforts.

The Research Alliance argues that there is not enough information to take recovery actions for the sea otter. According to the Sea Otter Research Alliance itself, the sea otter mortality database represents "one of the most extensive death assemblages ever developed for a wildlife

The Otter Project, Inc.

A Nonprofit Organization

3098 Stewart Court

Marina, CA 93933

Tel/Fax 831-883-4159

species." If we don't have enough information to take action for the sea otter, how can we ever take action to save the multitude of endangered species on the planet? How much is enough? Research results carry great uncertainty: Three recent and comprehensive research studies have now concluded that *Toxoplasma gondii* causes *very little* mortality in sea otters. Unlike uncertain research efforts, we know that recovery efforts targeted towards reducing the threat of oil spills or improving water quality will have wide-spread benefit to sea otters, ecosystems and our coastal communities. A balanced approach investing in both research and recovery is prudent.

Sea otter advocates encourage action over research. In 2005 The Otter Project surveyed over 300 informed advocates along with a group of casual visitors to The Otter Project web site. Consistently, actions to improve water quality, guard against the threat of oil spills, and abandon Southern California's no-otter zone ranked much higher than more federal or state research. Surprisingly, these advocates also ranked direct recovery efforts above public outreach and education. Taxpayers expect money to support sea otter recovery and would be disappointed to find their money supporting research at the exclusion of recovery.

State monies are scarce and precious and should be dedicated to state priorities. We believe the bill's allocation of fifty percent to the Department of Fish and Game is very generous and also suggests the Coastal Conservancy allocation should be spent on new efforts. We also believe that in these times of tight state budgets it would be very unpopular to channel state taxpayer money to a federal agency such as the US Geological Survey, even if the money is first 'cleansed' by Monterey Bay Aquarium or the University of California. Backfilling existing efforts and channeling money to the federal government will ultimately undermine taxpayer confidence and the long term success of the sea otter tax check-off.

The Otter Project supports a balanced, inclusive approach to sea otter recovery. In the past ten years we have spent nearly \$100,000 of our own budget and directed another \$250,000 of mitigation funds towards research. We *also* very actively support a variety of recovery programs including improvements in water quality, oil spill prevention, education, advocacy and support for targeted legislation, and ending of the federal no-otter zone in Southern California.

The Sea Otter Research Alliance stated at the March 28th meeting that it was your intent to only support research. If this is true, please let us know as soon as possible so that we can be most efficient with our time and efforts. If you share our broader vision of sea otter recovery, please immediately suggest to the Coastal Conservancy that they take a more balanced approach by including support for sea otter recovery.

Again, thank you for your hard work, dedication, and public service.

Sincerely,



Steve Shimek
Executive Director
The Otter Project
Monterey Coastkeeper