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Researchers investigate Morro Bay otter deaths

By BRIAN SEALS

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MONTEREY — A string of sea otter deaths in the Morro Bay area is being investigated by experts from the Monterey Bay region.

Veterinarians and researchers with the state Department of Fish and Game, UC Santa Cruz and the Monterey Bay Aquarium are investigating the cause of the deaths, which occurred during the past week.

More than 20 otters have been found dead or dying. Scientists suspect the culprit to be a naturally occurring marine biotoxin, but aren't sure yet.

Six otters have been examined at Monterey Bay Aquarium and all but one have died, aquarium veterinarian Michael Murray said Thursday.

"The clinical signs have all been similar," Murray said.

Necropsies were being performed at the Wildlife Veterinary Care and Research Center on the campus of UCSC's Long Marine Lab, which is a joint operation between UCSC and Fish and Game.

By Thursday afternoon, veterinarians at the Santa Cruz facility were on their 14th necropsy, said Carrie Wilson of Fish and Game.

"The good news is it does seem the number of carcasses (showing up) has slowed down," Wilson said.

Symptoms like seizures, fine muscle tremors and the animals lapsing into comas have been observed, Murray said.

Those clues point to a marine biotoxin, possibly domoic acid, produced from algae blooms that sometimes appear in Central Coast waters this time of year. But there is a long list of things that can affect the animal's brains aside from that potential cause, Murray said.

Murray said the otters brought to the aquarium have been young adults, old enough to live without their mothers but not yet of breeding age.

The number of animals recovered thus far equates to about 1 percent of the population.

At first glance, that may not appear to be a significant number, but the otter is federally protected and efforts have been ongoing for years to bolster their population.

Last June, an annual survey estimated the population at 2,500, a 17 percent increase from a year earlier and the highest on record since 1995.

An increasing number of otters have died in recent years, said Steve Shimek, executive director of the Marina-based Otter Project. Those mortality rates could be more significant than the annual spring census, he said.

A record 262 otters were found dead last year on California beaches. Deaths documented during the first three months of this year are on pace to top the 2003 mark, Shimek said.

"This year is ahead of last year's blistering pace," Shimek said.

Otters, prized for their pelts, were hunted to near-extinction during the 18th and 19th centuries. In later years they have been shot by fishermen, entangled in fishing gear and suffered from ocean pollutants. They were listed as an endangered species in 1977.