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### **Sea otter recovery plan proposed**

By Brian Seals, Staff Writer

An end to an otter relocation effort and abolishing a "no otter zone" in Southern California will help the population recover and make its habitat more healthy here on the Central Coast.

That was part of the message from supporters of a U.S. Fish and Wildlife proposal announced Wednesday.

The Fish and Wildlife announced the proposal to end the no otter zone created in 1987 as the agency seeks to help the animal's population grow.

The continuation of that program would not provide recovery of the sea otter," Fish and Wildlife spokeswoman Lois Grunwald said.

The no-otter zone stretches from Santa Barbara to the Mexican border.

While the proposal affects an area hundreds of miles from Santa Cruz County, the steps would help the area otter population by giving the animals more room to recover, said one advocate.

"If Fish and Wildlife chose to keep the zone, sea otters could be hunted down, trapped and probably relocated to this area," said Steve Shimek of the Otter Project in Marina. "We'd end up with dead otters on our doorstep. We have every reason to care about otters trapped and dropped on our doorstep."

Otters have not been relocated since 1993 and the relocation program was put on hiatus in 2000 as the Fish and Wildlife Service began revisiting its otter program.

During the early 1990s, 24 otters were relocated into the management zone north of Point Conception. Ten were relocated to Santa Cruz County between 1991 and 1993, six females at Natural Bridges State Beach and four males at New Brighton State Beach, one of which was released twice, said Greg Sanders of the Fish and Wildlife Service.

The proposed Fish and Wildlife plan calls for ending a relocation plan at San Nicolas Island where 140 were sent and about 30 now reside.

The southern sea otter is considered "threatened" under the federal Endangered Species Act. An annual survey estimated the population at 2,735 in the area from Santa Barbara to Half Moon Bay, a 3.8 percent decrease from the record-setting 2004 estimate of 2,835.

Researchers and advocates look to the three-year average population estimate, which stands at about 2,700 animals. A three-year average of 3,090 is the threshold to remove the animals from "threatened" designation under the Endangered Species Act.

U.S. Rep. Sam Farr, D-Carmel, hailed the proposal to end the no-otter zone.

"To ensure a sustainable sea otter population in the future, we need to allow sea otters to expand their range without forcing them to live in one spot or another," Farr said in a statement.