

August 30, 2006

## FARR URGES PATIENCE IN SEA OTTER FUNDING

More money likely if House majority changes

By KEVIN HOWE

Herald Staff Writer



Local experts told Rep. Sam Farr that sea otters' health can give indications of environmental issues.

Rep. Sam Farr came to Cannery Row Tuesday looking for ammunition from experts for the next battle for the California sea otter.

Members of the Otter Recovery Project who met with the Carmel Democrat at Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary headquarters were told not to expect much legislation out of Washington, D.C., for the remainder of this year. Farr said he hopes to come back under a new Democratic House majority leadership in January, when the nation's conservation priorities might be friendlier to ocean issues.

"The mood in Washington," he said, "is cut, squeeze and trim -- except for the war in Iraq."

Key to congressional interest in the sea otter, he said, lies in its general usefulness, economically, environmentally and even to national security.

"People love animals," Farr said, and the sea otters, California condors and other wildlife have an economic impact on the Central Coast's tourist industry, drawing wildlife fanciers from all over.

"It's a sentinel species," said Santa Cruz veterinarian Bartholomew Bottoms of Save Our Shores, "because it stays in the local environment."

The otters suffer from significant diseases related to the watershed, he said. "They can tell us about the health of the waters."

Bottoms said that a representative from the Department of Homeland Security spoke to a veterinarians' conference that he attended recently about the concept that wildlife could serve as a monitor for bioterrorism, if animals are suddenly stricken with newly introduced diseases.

Farr immediately asked him to prepare a memo for him to pursue that issue. "Homeland security," he said, "is where the money is."

In response to Farr's question, "What's at risk here?" Steve Shimek, executive director of the Otter Project, said the otter population on the Central Coast has remained stable while other marine populations are growing, and as a "sentinel species," the coastal mammals "tell us something is basically wrong."

Mike Murray, staff veterinarian for the Monterey Bay Aquarium, said a large percentage of sea otters suffer from infectious diseases and emerging diseases, that should serve as a warning to human health. "We see a hoofprint in the sand, but is it a horse or a zebra?" Runoff from the land to the ocean, he said, appears to be a factor.

Every sea otter caught and examined by aquarium scientists, Murray said, feeds five or six other research projects, and otter research benefits more than one group.

Farr recommended that the group put its immediate efforts into supporting Assembly Bill 2485, legislation to protect sea otters sponsored by Assemblymen John Laird, D-Santa Cruz, and Dave Jones, D-Sacramento, and was sent to Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's desk Tuesday for signature.

AB 2485 would make California penalties for killing a sea otter equal to those under federal law, prohibit dumping materials harmful to sea otters into state waters, encourage disposal of cat litter in landfills rather than flushing, to reduce harmful *Toxoplasma gondii* in the sea otters' habitat, and establish a voluntary tax check-off for sea otter research and protection.

Farr said sea otter supporters should write the governor in support of the bill.