

Article published Aug 30, 2006

**Otter numbers stagnant**  
***Lawmakers seek ways to provide more protection***  
**By CHRISTOPHER ORTIZ**  
**The Salinas Californian**

MONTEREY - Worried that people have forgotten about the plight of sea otters, allies of the endangered species sought ways to refocus the public's attention during a meeting Tuesday with U.S. Rep. Sam Farr, D-Carmel.

Representatives from advocacy groups, including The Otter Project and Friends of the Sea Otter and the Monterey Bay Aquarium, met with Farr to discuss the animal they described as charismatic, inspiring and cute as a koala bear.

The otter population may not be as well off as people think, experts told the group, and otters' status can reflect problems with other sea life.

According to numbers provided by The Otter Project, the population of the marine mammal has decreased in the past two years from 2,825 otters in 2004 to an estimated 2,692 today.

The sea otter population has stagnated over the past few years, said Steve Shimek, executive director of The Otter Project. Shimek said one reason is disease.

"What this tells us about the ocean," he said, "is the ocean is turning into a stew of diseases that could also impact human health."

Proposed legislation would increase protection for the animals.

In California, Assembly Bill 2485 would establish a fund from tax donations for sea otter research. It calls for increased penalties for taking or killing sea otters and for dumping materials into state waters. It also would require changes to cat litter packaging to reduce the litter's presence in landfills and waste water, which eventually reaches the sea. Cat feces include a toxin researchers have linked with a number of sea otter deaths.

"Their back yard isn't healthy," Farr said. "They are not producing a new generation."

The bill now waits on the governor's desk.

In May, Farr introduced the Southern Sea Otter Recovery and Research Act. If approved, the bill would, among other things, create a recovery program for sea otter populations along the California coast. The bill is now in committee.