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Are we saving sea otters or studying them?

Congressman Sam Farr has always been a friend of the ocean, coast, and sea otters. But he is getting some bad advice on his sea otter bill. This past week at Defenders of Wildlife Sea Otter Awareness Week, Congressman Farr announced that he has introduced a bill, the "Southern Sea Otter Recovery and Research Act" that is long on research and very short on recovery. The Act authorizes \$5 million per year be spent on southern sea otters. Of that \$5 million, the Act immediately sets aside \$2 million for a "Sea otter research program" and lists a series of projects to be funded. The rest is authorized for a "Southern sea otter recovery program."

The problem is the 'recovery program' then lists more research and gives lip service to action. The most popular and expensive research programs, studies that will easily swallow up \$3 million per year or more, are listed under the 'recovery program' including a Health Assessment Plan to include "among other matters, the immunology, virology, toxicology, bacteriology, parasitology, endocrinology, and nutritional status of southern sea otters." Research or recovery? You be the judge.

Sea otters and the Central Coast marine ecosystem need our help. Harbors need to be cleaned of toxic chemicals, huge tankers and container ships need to be kept in their shipping lanes to avoid another Exxon Valdez, coastal sewage plants should be helped to upgrade to tertiary treatment, more game wardens are needed to deter shootings and malicious boat strikes, and the archaic no-otter zone encompassing all of southern California must be abolished. Fixing these problems would help sea otters, contribute to ocean health, and ultimately be wise investments for human health as well. These are the tasks that should be included in the 'recovery program' but are never mentioned. Instead, sea otters get a 'health assessment.'

Research is fundamental to sea otter recovery. But isn't it time to take action and actually do something? Even the Southern Sea Otter Research Alliance states that, "Using one of the most extensive death assemblages ever developed for a wildlife species, researchers have determined that infectious disease and intoxications constitute the most significant cause of mortality in California sea otters." Researchers might say we still don't know enough. If we can't take action on behalf of the sea otter - with such extensive information - what does that say about our ability to take action for any wildlife species?

With 28 marine science institutions in Mr. Farr's district, we understand where he is coming from. But if Mr. Farr wants to pump money into local institutions, he shouldn't do it in the name of sea otter recovery. There is nothing wrong with sea otter research; we should support research. But there must be balance. Many months ago Congressman Farr was offered edits that cleanly separated research and recovery projects 50/50 and listed real recovery actions. Unfortunately, Mr. Farr has chosen to move ahead with the same bill he proposed two years ago, that was never given a committee hearing.

Congressman Farr's bill will be lauded, and this opinion criticized, by institutions and agencies hoping for a cut of the appropriations pie. Some national groups, either out of touch with local issues or wanting to curry favors with the Congressman will also support the bill. But will the Southern Sea Otter Recovery and Research Act actually help sea otters?

We should learn from our mistakes. Last year California passed a sea otter bill labeling cat litter (researchers said cat litter carried a disease, toxoplasmosis, deadly to sea otters) and creating a tax check-off to support sea otter research. Since then, new research indicates that the kitty-poop disease is not likely a problem for otters after all; and the tax check-off may not raise enough money to continue.

Californians might be more willing to support wildlife recovery if they saw some action. We would all - people and otters -- benefit from cleaner harbors, seas safe from tanker collisions, and better sewage and stormwater treatment. But like global warming, it is far easier to study the problem, than to offer solutions.

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