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USGS: Sea otter population drops for first time since late 1990s

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The Southern sea otter's three-year population average has declined for the first time since the late 1990s, the U.S. Geological Survey announced Tuesday.

According to the USGS, the latest three-year average counted 2,813 Southern sea otters in California a '0.5 percent dip from the three-year average calculated in 2008.

The group averages the endangered animal's population count over three-year periods because individual year totals can be skewed by factors such as weather conditions and otter distribution.

The USGS said it counted 2,654 sea otters in the spring of 2009, a 3.8 percent decline compared with the 2008 count of 2,760.

Officials say for sea otters to be removed from the endangered species list, the three-year running averages have to exceed 3,090 for three continuous years.

Andrew Johnson, manager of the Sea Otter Research and Conservation program at the Monterey Bay Aquarium, issued a statement after the initial announcement.

"We're disappointed that sea otter numbers in California are again on a downward trend," Johnson said.

Officials offered their own theories for the decline, but said more research is needed.

"The survey results leave us more determined than ever to continue our own sea otter research," Johnson said.
