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Worried scientists find sea otter numbers continue to decline

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Southern sea otters generally live in about a 250-mile range of near-shore waters from San Mateo County to Santa Barbara County. (HERALD FILE)

MONTEREY — The three-year average sea otter population on California's coast declined for the first time in more than a decade, according to a U.S. Geological Survey.

Officials from the survey counted 2,654 otters this spring along the coast from Point Concepcion in the Santa Barbara area to Half Moon Bay. The count includes a colony of otters around the Channel Islands.

It was the lowest single-year total since 2003, when about 2,200 were counted.

But more alarming, said officials at the Otter Project, an otter advocacy group in Monterey, is that the running three-year average, which the USGS uses for the official population count, dropped for the first time since the late 1990s.

"We've always identified the sea otter as the canary in the coal mine of the marine system," said Allison Ford, the new executive director of the Otter Project.

"I hope this can be a wake-up call."

The three-year average of 2,813, which is based on the counts from 2007 to 2009, is a slight drop from last year's three-year average of 2,826.

Last year's average was only a 0.3 percent increase over the three-year average from 2005 to 2007, which otter observers saw as an indication that the population was leveling off.

Otter counts are conducted in the spring and fall.

Spring numbers are considered more reliable because the weather is better and because, in the fall, kelp beds are thicker, making otters harder to

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see.

The otter population count must reach a three-year average of 3,090 before the sea mammal can be considered for removal from the threatened species list.

The findings are not surprising, Ford said, because more otters are turning up dead and a preliminary evaluation of the spring count in March suggested the numbers were down.

"A lot of this is stuff we've known is a problem in terms of water quality," Ford said.

The otter population's status is generally considered a strong indicator of the overall health of the waters off California's coast, Ford said.

"Their population is a little more delicate than that of the sea lion," she said. "When there is something wrong with otters, there is something wrong with the ecosystem."

While contamination and errant boaters are partially to blame, an assortment of diseases is the main cause, Ford said.

"There's not one particular disease we can point to and say, 'This is killing the otters,'" she said.

Many otters appear to have suppressed immune systems because of contaminated ocean water. The Otter Project encourages local cities to tighten their policies on drainage and chemical runoff to reduce the amount of toxins that flow to the ocean, Ford said.

While the otter population is down, marine organizations and local officials are continually working to increase an otter population that at one point was hunted nearly to extinction.

The Monterey Bay Aquarium spends \$1 million per year on sea otter research. Congress will soon consider a bill sponsored by Rep. Sam Farr, D-Carmel, that proposes \$5 million a year for five years toward otter research. Field researchers are receiving about \$250,000 a year from checkoff contributions designated on state tax returns.

"The sea otter is one of California's endangered species that is a success story," Ford said. "We've been able to bring them back from the brink of extinction."