

Critical Habitat Designated for Sea Otters

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Anne Hillman/KUCB

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service officially designated 5,855 acres as critical habitat for southwest Alaska sea otters on Wednesday. The areas span from the end of the Aleutians to the Alaska Peninsula and mostly include near-shore areas that are less than 20 meters deep and kelp beds. U.S. Fish and Wildlife spokesperson Bruce Woods says the designation only affects federal activities in the area.

-- (Otters - 1 19
s "...designated critical
habitat.")

That means the designation should not affect any commercial, subsistence, or sport fishing. Activities that might cause major environmental changes, like dredging or drilling for oil and gas, would have to be reviewed by the service before being approved.

-- (Otters - 1b 5
s "...yet know of.")

The critical habitat designation is required under the Endangered Species Act because Alaska's southwestern population of sea otters is considered 'threatened.' Their population declined from 100-thousand in the 1970s to less than 40-thousand now. In the Aleutians, the population is less than 10,000. Woods says protecting the habitat is one step towards protecting the population.

-- (Otters - 2 28
s "...to escape.")

Woods says
it's too soon to say if this will be enough to help rebuild the population.

The area for the critical habitat designation was selected last year and put up for public comment after the Service came to an agreement with the Center for Biological Diversity. The Center sued Fish and Wildlife to get the otters listed as threatened in 2005. When the government did not designate any critical habitat, the Center sued them again in 2006. Rebecca Noblin is a staff attorney with the Center in Anchorage.

-- (Otters - 3 17 s "...that
was carried through.")

The organization wanted more areas to be designated but says this is a good start to protecting the species. They are also concerned about the potential impacts of oil and gas drilling in the North Aleutian Basin on the threatened otter populations. A five-year lease plan for the area is currently under consideration by the Minerals Management Service.

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