



Joint News Release

April 14, 2004

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State Investigates Increased Mortality of California Sea Otters

MORRO BAY – The California Department of Fish and Game, in collaboration with the Monterey Bay Aquarium, United States Geological Survey (USGS), United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), California Department of Health Services (CDHS), The Marine Mammal Center (TMMC), UC Santa Cruz and UC Davis is responding to a spike of California sea otter mortality which appears to be centered in the vicinity of Morro Bay along the central coast of California. More than 20 live or dead stranded sea otters have been recovered from this region over the past week – about 1 percent of the wild population. The cause of this mortality event is under investigation, but is currently unknown.

CDFG and the above agencies are working collaboratively to facilitate recovery, transport and care for live-stranded otters and rapid postmortem examinations of dead otters. Postmortem examinations have been completed on 12 sea otters to date and numerous tissue samples have been collected for diagnostic testing. In addition, sea otter food items have been collected from the most heavily impacted areas and are being submitted to CDHS and UCSC to test for the presence of marine biotoxins. These commonly occur during periods known as “red tides.” Additional diagnostic tests are currently underway to help determine the cause of this incident. Marine biotoxin exposure is suspected, but not confirmed at this time.

A CDHS health advisory, which alerts the public to refrain from consuming sport-harvested bivalve shellfish of any type (mussels, clams, scallops), has been in effect since March 26, throughout San Luis Obispo County.

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Field personnel continue to survey the affected area for sick sea otters and are collecting additional samples to be analyzed by the CDHS laboratory in Richmond. Clinical signs in affected otters include seizures, muscle tremors and coma. Persons finding beached sea otters are encouraged to contact The Marine Mammal Center at (415) 289-7325, the Monterey Bay Aquarium at (831) 648-4840, or CDFG at (805) 772-1135.

