

Southeast Alaska Regional Dive Fisheries Association Testimony on SB 60

I am testifying today on behalf of the Southeast Alaska Regional Dive Fisheries Association (SARDFA), I am testifying in favor of SB 60, introduced by Senator Stedman.

First a little background on SARDFA.

SARDFA was formed in 1998 under Alaska statutes 43.76. SARDFA is a non-profit, economic development corporation whose mission is to develop, expand, and enhance new and existing dive fisheries in Southeast Alaska.

The Alaska Department's of Fish and Game entire miscellaneous shellfish program is supported by the assessments on the dive resources which has a mandatory tax of 7% on sea urchins, and 5% on both sea cucumbers and geoduck.

There are approximately 200 active divers in these fisheries. In recent years the annual ex-vessel value of our fisheries has been approximately \$12 to \$15 million. These dive fisheries are now one of the most important fall and winter commercial fisheries in SE AK and have a very positive effect of the winter economies of Ketchikan, Craig, Klawock, Sitka, Petersburg, and Wrangell.

However, due to sea otter predation these fisheries will eventually drop to such low levels that in the foreseeable future the GHL and ex-vessel values will not be able to sustain the fisheries we see today. Perhaps the sea otters will not move to the inside waters of SE AK as quickly as they have in the outer coast, but the largest fisheries occur on the outer coasts of Prince of Wales Island and eventually the sea otter, if left unchecked, will move into most waters of SE AK. Since 1995, it is estimated \$22.4 million in wholesale value has been lost due to sea otter predation. The secondary impact of these losses on the regional economy is estimated to be an additional \$5.8 million, for a total of \$28.2 million (McDowell – 2011).

Recent research by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) has documented the following facts about the sea otter population in SE AK. The sea otter population is approximately 25,000 and growing at 12-14% per year. These marine mammals consume shellfish at a rate of approximately 25% of their body weight (average of 65 lbs) each day, equating to an average annual shellfish harvest of 148 million pounds. By comparison, the annual commercial shellfish harvest in SE AK was less than 5 million pounds in 2012. Projecting this growth out to the year 2018, the sea otter population will be approximately 50,000 and the annual shellfish harvest by otters will be approximately 300 million pounds.

One of the first of the shellfish industries to fall prey to the sea otter's appetite was the abalone fishery on the outer coast of Southeast Alaska. It is now obvious that sea urchins, geoduck clams, sea cucumbers, and Dungeness crab are being impacted. Sea otters have also been observed eating red king crab, tanner crab, and shrimp.

The Alaska Department of Fish and Game has already closed sea cucumber and sea urchin areas to commercial harvest due to the predation by sea otters on those species and has reduced the harvest of the geoduck clam fishery. Numerous areas in SE AK no longer have a viable Dungeness crab fishery due to sea otter predation. It is almost guaranteed that more areas will be closed in upcoming years.

The ability of people to harvest Dungeness crab, sea cucumbers, abalone, razor clams and other clams is being negatively impacted by sea otters. Information from towns and villages such as

Kake, Hoonah, Sitka, and Klawock, indicate that sea otters have severely impacted shellfish in the immediate vicinity of those towns.

SARDFA has been very pro active in the sea otter situation in SE AK since our inception. SARDFA has been developing ideas and support for proactive approaches to sea otter management in SE AK. SARDFA has used its own monies to fund the University of Alaska, ADF&G, and the McDowell Group to research the effects of sea otters in SE AK. SARDFA has spent 10's of thousands of dollars to collect the best information on sea otters in SE AK.

SARDFA along with other organizations in SE AK such as the Southeast Conference, Juneau Economic Development Council, Petersburg Vessels Owners Association, Southeast Alaska Fishermen's Alliance, United Fishermen of Alaska, and various native organizations have been trying for years to establish a sea otter management plan in Southeast Alaska with the U.S Fish and Wildlife Service. While we have had many meetings with the USFWS we are not making any headway with this problem.

SARDFA requests the Federal and State agencies acknowledge the impact of sea otters on the commercial, subsistence, and personal use of sea cucumber, sea urchin, geoduck clam and Dungeness crab, with the ultimate goal of an ecosystem-based sea otter management plan benefiting all users of these resources and protecting the resources from depletion.

SARDFA believes that SB 60 will encourage the legal harvest of sea otters by Alaska Natives in order to maintain shellfish species in SE AK. The extra \$100 will help pay for the cost of operating a boat in order to hunt the sea otter and help defray tanning costs. Last year 800 sea otters were harvested by SE natives. The USFWS has stated that over 2,000 could be harvested on an annual basis and still maintain the current population of 25,000 animals.

SARDFA is for any and all plans that will move this issue forward. We encourage you to move SB 60 forward.

Thank-you for your time.