Julie Decker
P.O. Box 2138, Wrangell, AK 99929
juliedecker@gci.net

Senator Cathy Giessel, Chair, Senate Resources Committee
State Capitol Room 427, Juneau AK, 99801
Phone: 907-465-4843; Fax: 907-465-3871
Senator.Cathy.Giessel@akleg.gov

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RE: Support for SB 60 / HB 145 – sea otter population management

Dear Chair Giessel & Senate Resources Committee,

I am a past commercial diver in Southeast Alaska (SEA). My husband continues to commercially dive. Our family also commercially fishes for other species in SEA. I was the former executive director of the Southeast Alaska Regional Dive Fisheries Association (SARDFA). I have also worked on this otter issue as a member of the Board of Directors of the Southeast Conference (SEC), the United Fishermen of Alaska (UFA), the Co-Chair of the Ocean Cluster working group, and the Chair of the Wrangell Economic Development Committee.

I am writing to support for SB 60 / HB 145 – an act related to sea otter population management – as a mechanism to encourage legal sea otter harvest and to spark a productive and urgent conversation about solutions to conserve our shellfish species in Southeast Alaska (SEA).

Recent research by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) has documented the following facts about the sea otter population in SEA. 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 consumption of 148 million pounds. By comparison, the annual commercial shellfish harvest in SEA was less than 5 million pounds in 2010. Projecting this growth out to the year 2018, the sea otter population will be approximately 50,000 and the annual shellfish consumption by otters will be approximately 300 million pounds.

As commercial divers, we have personally observed the destruction to the ecosystem due to sea otter predation. Sea otters are a special type of predator. They eat 100% of the shellfish in an area and then move on, including crab, urchins, abalone, clams, sea cucumbers, geoducks, starfish and gumboots. They do not leave females or undersized creatures for further propagation.

Certain individuals and groups are promoting the idea that the continued growth of the sea otter population is a good thing, because sea otters eat urchins, which in turn eat kelp, which in turn reduced carbon dioxide in the ocean/atmosphere. These people infer that more sea otters

in SEA will therefore reduce global climate change. From what I have observed as a commercial diver, this is NOT the whole truth. The interaction between sea otters and urchins is merely one sliver of the interactions occurring within the entire ecosystem of the near-shore ocean bottom. For example, what does the removal of all the filter-feeders from the near-shore ocean bottom do to the ecosystem and the health of the kelp beds? What will happen to the ecosystem in areas in which habitat does not support urchins and kelp already exists? Commercial divers can tell you that these areas look like waste lands - even the sediment changes consistency. These observations may not be "scientific", but they are supported by an accumulation of thousands of hours of dive time.

The sea otter is decimating the shellfish populations in SEA. This fact has been documented by commercial divers, fishermen, subsistence users and biologists at the Alaska Dept. of Fish & Game, as commercial harvest areas are closed after sea otters move into these areas. If the growth of the sea otter population is not reduced, not only will all commercial shellfish harvests in SEA be closed, but also sport, personal use and subsistence harvests will end.

Sea otters are a renewable resource that, if properly managed and marketed (as other Alaska renewable resources are), could add to the economy of the region. For at least the past ten thousand years, the "natural" environment in SEA included human interaction and harvest of sea otters. Humans were a part of the natural balance of otter populations until approximately 100 years ago, when the harvest became imbalanced and protections were placed on otters. The rebound of otters in SEA is a positive conservation story, which instead has turned into a nightmare due to the inability and/or unwillingness of USFWS to evolve its conservation strategies under the MMPA.

SB 60 will encourage the legal harvest of sea otters by Alaska Natives in order to save shellfish species in SEA. SB 60 will also elevate the discussion and the seriousness of the problem. We hope further productive discussions regarding proactive sea otter management will lead to innovative ideas which will provide a win-win solution for all who depend upon the shellfish resources in the region.

In conclusion, the State of Alaska spends millions of dollars to market Alaska Seafood as sustainably managed to the world. In this case, the Federal government is blocking the ability of the State of Alaska to sustainably manage the shellfish species in SEA. The State of Alaska needs to address this inconsistency with our Constitution and it sounds like Governor Parnell's Administration is willing to help.

Thank you for your consideration.

Julie Decker, commercial fishing family