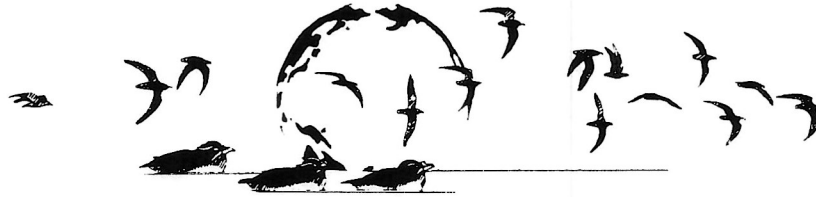

Pacific Seabird Group



DEDICATED TO THE STUDY AND CONSERVATION OF PACIFIC SEABIRDS AND THEIR ENVIRONMENT

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March 19, 1993

Honorable Gerry E. Studds, Chairman
Committee on Merchant Marine and Fisheries
Room 1334, Longworth House Office Building
Washington DC 20515-6230

Re: Oversight Hearing on Restoration of Prince William Sound

Dear Chairman Studds:

The Pacific Seabird Group (PSG) thanks the Chairman for this opportunity to provide our perspective on the restoration of Prince William Sound after the Exxon Valdez oil spill. PSG is an international organization that was founded in 1972 to promote knowledge, study and conservation of Pacific seabirds. PSG draws its members from the entire Pacific Basin, including Russia, Canada, Japan, Mexico, Australia and New Zealand. Among PSG's members are biologists who study seabirds, state and federal officials who manage seabird refuges, and individuals interested in marine conservation. During the past twenty years, PSG has hosted symposia on the biology and management of virtually every seabird species that the oil spill affected. PSG has commented extensively on the Trustees' restoration plans and one of our founders, James G. King, serves on the Trustees' Public Advisory Group.

I. Seabirds Were Severely Damaged by the Oil Spill

Seabirds are particularly vulnerable to oil spills and were perhaps the single resource most damaged by the Exxon Valdez spill. The Trustees estimate that the spill killed as many as 645,000 seabirds, including murrelets, loons, cormorants, pigeon guillemots, grebes, sea ducks, marbled murrelets, Kittlitz' murrelets, black oystercatchers, Bonaparte's gulls, arctic terns, black-legged kittiwakes and tufted puffins. PSG is particularly concerned about marbled murrelets because last September the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (FWS) listed the population of this species from Washington to California as threatened under the Endangered Species Act.

II. Restoration Activities, 1989-1992

PSG recognizes that establishing an infrastructure to plan and implement wisely a \$1 billion restoration program is difficult and demanding. While PSG had some initial problems with opportunities to comment on the Trustees' work plans in a timely manner, we believe that the Trustees have resolved their organizational problems and intend to provide meaningful public involvement in the restoration process. We are especially encouraged that the Trustees have selected a Public Advisory Group and expect that the Trustees will give the opinions of the advisory group much weight.

Despite improvements in the Trustees' procedures, PSG is concerned about some restoration policies. The Trustees seem to be applying an agency pork barrel approach to funding decisions and spend too much money on overhead and projects that do not directly restore natural resources. The Trustees will spend \$38 million on restoration during 1993 that will have little tangible benefit to seabirds. We discuss below PSG's recommended approach to the future restoration of seabirds. PSG also believes that federal and state agencies should use their existing authorities to protect species damaged by the spill. For example, logging on government and private lands (e.g., inholdings in Kachemak Bay State Park and Afognak Island) that are prime habitat for marbled murrelets and harlequin ducks should be curtailed. The National Marine Fisheries Service should enforce the Migratory Bird Treaty Act to protect marbled murrelets in Prince William Sound that drown in gillnets.

PSG believes that the Trustees should ensure that they use the very best available science in making restoration decisions. Restoration requires a multi-disciplinary approach that uses a wide variety of expertise. It is especially important that the Trustees obtain a broad range of peer reviews from biologists who have international reputations in seabird restoration ecology. Many of the most qualified scientists live in Canada or the United Kingdom and, to the best of our knowledge, are not consulted during the reviews of project proposals. PSG would like an opportunity to submit names of additional peer reviewers to the Trustees. We also suggest that the Trustees establish procedures to ensure that their peer reviewers reveal any conflicts of interest that might influence their assessment and/or sponsorship of various restoration projects. On occasion, we believe that the Trustees have proposed studies that cannot be justified scientifically.

In general, we believe that the damage assessment projects for seabirds have been worthwhile. PSG believes that understanding the magnitude of harm is important to decide the types and extent of restoration activities that may be necessary. PSG also believes that the studies on marbled murrelet and harlequin duck habitat requirements should prove to be very useful in assessing potential land acquisitions for these species. These studies also should assist federal and state forestry agencies in establishing the width of forested buffer strips that are necessary to protect the breeding sites of harlequin ducks.

III. Suggested Restoration Activities, 1993 and Beyond

PSG understands that the restoration team is working on a draft Restoration Plan that will soon be available for public review. PSG intends to be as involved with that process as possible. PSG supports using restoration funds for options that are technically feasible, have a high potential to improve the recovery of injured resources and pass muster under a benefit/cost test. PSG believes that restoration options should be evaluated from the perspective of whether they benefit more than a single resource. PSG's preferred options generally would benefit an entire community of seabirds (and often other organisms), not just a single species.

PSG is concerned that the Trustees have limited their consideration of the restoration of seabirds to the geographic area of the oil slick. While such a geographic criterion may be appropriate for inter-tidal organisms, it ignores the fact that seabirds are migratory. Oiled seabirds were seen in the Pribilof Islands during 1989 and seabirds from the Shumagin and Aleutian Islands probably were killed. Birds may be moving into the oil spill area from elsewhere in Alaska to replace dead birds. The Trustees have thus far refused to implement restoration projects for seabirds elsewhere in Alaska that were directly or indirectly depleted by the spill. Our recommended approach, which we hope will be contained in the Trustees' draft Restoration Plan, focuses on habitat acquisition and the restoration of the natural bio-diversity of seabird breeding islands.

A. Habitat Acquisition

Because protecting habitat benefits seabirds and all other wildlife species, PSG supports habitat acquisition as a means of restoring the actual or equivalent resources that the spill injured. Besides acquiring specific seabird colonies (Enclosure 1), PSG strongly supports the purchase of any old growth areas in Prince William Sound, the Kenai Peninsula and Afognak Island. These habitats are important to nesting marbled murrelets, bald eagles and harlequin ducks. Protecting these areas would benefit many other forms of wildlife such as salmon and black oystercatchers as well as enhance recreation opportunities. Land acquisition, however, can be extremely expensive and the Trustees should ensure that the lands purchased are valuable to wildlife and that the benefits are worth the cost. PSG suggests the Trustees consider the use of conservation easements as well as fee purchase. Restrictions on use and development may provide adequate protection at less cost, allowing more land to be protected.

B. Restoring Natural Bio-Diversity of Seabird Breeding Islands

PSG is disappointed that the Trustees have not begun to restore the natural bio-diversity of the seabird colonies in the Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge and elsewhere by promoting a program to eliminate exotic rats, foxes and other creatures that

have caused the local extinction of seabird colonies.^{1/} Foxes that farmers released on seabird islands and later abandoned depress the breeding population of seabirds on the Alaskan Maritime National Wildlife Refuge by several million each year. FWS should humanely end the suffering of the foxes that were deserted in this hostile environment and barely survive by depredating seabird colonies. The Canadian Wildlife Service is using funds from the Nestucca oil spill to restore seabird habitat in the Queen Charlotte Archipelago, British Columbia, by removing introduced rats and raccoons. This means of restoration is financially feasible and highly effective.

Predator removal has the highest yield of any action that the Trustees might take to restore the actual or equivalent populations of the twenty or so seabird species that the oil spill killed. It would help the entire seabird community to recover, including island-nesting sea ducks, dabbling ducks, oystercatchers, wintering waterfowl, puffins, murrelets, gulls and terns. For example, after farmers stocked Kaligagan Island with foxes in 1921, its seabird population plunged so low that the renowned Alaska naturalist Olaus Murie recommended that it continue as a fox farm. In the 1980s, after foxes had died out, Kaligagan supported 125,000 burrowing seabirds. There is simply no scientific question that introduced predators such as rats and foxes devastate seabird colonies or that removing such creatures can enable the restoration of the natural bio-diversity to the breeding islands.

IV. Conclusion

PSG remains cautiously optimistic that the restoration can be a success. We believe that the Trustees have developed procedures to ensure that the trust funds will be spent wisely. We encourage the Trustees to use the very best science in making their decisions. Finally, we strongly encourage the Trustees to include in the draft Restoration Plan our suggestions to acquire appropriate seabird habitat and to restore the natural bio-diversity of seabird breeding islands. Non-native predators on breeding islands kill as many seabirds each year as several Exxon Valdez oil spills. Thank you for this opportunity to lend our expertise and views on these important issues.

Sincerely,

Craig S. Hanson

Enclosure

^{1/} FWS had budgeted \$50,000 in 1992 to remove introduced foxes from islands in the Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge. We understand that the Director's office in Washington DC reprogrammed those funds elsewhere over the objections of the Alaska Regional Director and PSG.

PACIFIC SEABIRD GROUP

RECOMMENDED SEABIRD COLONIES TO ACQUIRE

Alaska Peninsula (South Side)

High
Sutwik
Ugaiushak
Fox
Hydra
Central
2 Unnamed islands (Nakalilok Bay)
Unnamed Islands between Unavikshak and Kumlik
Spitz
Brothers
Cherni
Sanak

Fox Islands (Eastern Aleutians)

Tanginak (Akun)
Kaligagan (including 7 islets on north side)
Derbin (Tigalda)
Poa (Tigalda)
Tangik (Tidgald)
Unnamed islet (Trident Bay)
Unnamed islet (Akun Strait)
Puffin
Ogangan (Unalaska)
Emerald (Unalaska)
Ship Rock (Umnak Pass)
Kigul (Umnak Pass)
Ogchul (Umnak)
Vesvidof (Umnak)
Adugak (Umnak)
Ananuliak (Umnak)

Kodiak Island Vicinity

Flat
Tugidak
Triplets
Catherdral
Ladder
Sheep
Cub
Amee
Nut
Puffin
John
Chinak Island and Rocks
Utesistol
Suitlak
Middle
Kekur

Bering Sea

King
Fairway Rock
Egg (Norton Sound)

Gulf of Alaska

Sand
Gull
Middleton