

Pacific Seabird Group



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

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Paul R. Schmidt
Assistant Director for Migratory Birds and State Programs.
U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
Mail Stop 3238
1849 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20240

Re: Support for Eradication of Feral Rats on Kiska Island, Alaska

Dear Paul:

On behalf of the Pacific Seabird Group (PSG), we wish to express our support for the removal of introduced Norway rats from Kiska Island, Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge, which are jeopardizing the long-term health of the largest auklet colony in Alaska. As you know, PSG is an international non-profit organization that was founded in 1972 to promote knowledge, study and conservation of Pacific seabirds. PSG takes a broad international perspective in recognition that the oceans are tied together by the wandering of seabirds and the flow of ocean currents. Our membership is drawn from the entire Pacific basin, including Canada, Mexico, Russia, Japan, China, Australia, New Zealand, and the USA. Among PSG members are biologists who have research interests in Pacific seabirds, government officials who manage seabird refuges and populations and individuals who are interested in marine conservation. PSG has long advised and worked cooperatively with government agencies to further these interests, especially with regard to predator removal from seabird colonies. PSG worked hard to help FWS secure a grant from the *Exxon Valdez* Oil Spill Trustee Council to remove introduced foxes from seabird colonies in Alaska. PSG was awarded one of the first NAFTA grants to bring New Zealand biologists to North America to teach and train Mexican seabird biologists about predator removal techniques. Most recently we supported the National Park Service in a project to remove rats from Anacapa Island, California, where the rats were jeopardizing Xantus' murrelets.

We understand that Dr. Ian Jones has just completed his third field season at Kiska evaluating the impacts of rats on least auklets. He has documented not only rat predation on eggs and chicks, but also predation on adult auklets as well as the caching of adult auklets. Rats have caused lowered reproductive success of this least auklet colony, far below levels recorded previously. Dr. Jones has developed a population model that concludes that the least auklet population could be extirpated if nothing were done to reduce the rate of predation. Many of these findings were brought to the attention of the general public in an article entitled "Plague of Rats" that appeared in the Anchorage Daily News on July 13, 2003.

We understand that the Alaska Maritime NWR has begun a careful and scientific planning effort to control rats in a portion of the colony at Sirius Point, Kiska. Refuge biologists would need to use rodenticide to try to reduce rat populations sufficiently to increase auklet survival and reproductive success. If that effort demonstrates that a control program could be effective to enhance auklet populations, the next step would be starting either a long-term control program on a portion of the island or an island-wide eradication effort. PSG strongly supports an effort to remove the rats from the entire island. We acknowledge that Kiska would be the largest island ever cleared of rats, but understand that the experts believe it is technically feasible to do so.

Our purpose in writing is to request that the refuge be provided sufficient funds and other support to begin its control work at Sirius Point during the 2004 field season. In addition, we ask that you put into the FWS budget planning process sufficient funds (likely several million dollars) to eradicate the rats entirely from Kiska Island a few years from now when the planning and techniques have been perfected. We also offer our support and efforts to provide leadership in the bird conservation community and public at-large to persuade EPA to approve aerial application of rodenticides, respond favorably to any NEPA public comment processes and similar assistance. PSG believes that it can help shape public opinion to move this important project forward. We need leadership and a financial commitment from FWS to make this project a reality.

Paul, PSG appreciates your consideration of our comments on this important issue. Let's work together to ward off a serious threat to a unique seabird species before it becomes a crisis. Together we can show the world conservation community that rat eradication at a large scale is not only possible, but is our responsibility.

Sincerely,

Craig S. Harrison
Vice Chair for Conservation