

Pacific Seabird Group



DEDICATED TO THE STUDY AND CONSERVATION OF SEABIRDS AND THEIR ENVIRONMENT

Verna Gill
Chair
1101 Lynx Lane
Eagle River, AK 99577
907-250-3721
verna_gill@hotmail.com

Craig S. Harrison, Esq.
Vice Chair for Conservation
4953 Sonoma Mountain Road
Santa Rosa, CA 95404
202-778-2240
charrison@hunton.com

Douglas Bertram
Chair-Elect
Canadian Wildlife Service
9860 West Saanich Road
Sidney, BC V8L 4B2
bertramd@pac.dfo-mpo.gc.ca

December 11, 2007

Bob Merrill
California Coastal Commission
710 E Street, Suite 200
Eureka, CA 95501

Re: Disturbance of Seabirds By Fireworks Displays

Dear Mr. Merrill,

On behalf of the Pacific Seabird Group (PSG) we want to offer our views on the disturbance of seabirds on Gualala Point Island by fireworks displays. PSG is an international, non-profit organization that was founded in 1972 to promote the knowledge, study, and conservation of Pacific seabirds. It has a membership drawn from the entire Pacific basin, including Canada, Mexico, Peru, Chile, Russia, Japan, South Korea, China, Australia, New Zealand, and the USA. Among PSG's 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.

We understand that the Coastal Commission will be hearing a report on the effect of an 18-minute fireworks display on a population of seabirds and marine mammals. This display was held on July 6, 2007 in the vicinity of Gualala Point Island in northern Sonoma County. This event engendered a fair amount of local attention as a result of perceived disturbance to nesting Brandt's and Pelagic Cormorants during a similar event in 2006. As a result, a group of citizens, the Sea Ranch CCM Stewardship Task Force of The Sea Ranch Association, contacted biologists with the US Bureau of Land Management and the US Fish and Wildlife Service. With the help of these biologists, the Stewardship Task Force established a protocol for monitoring the seabirds during the 2007 breeding season, with particular interest in gauging the effect of the fireworks display on these birds. A description of the protocol and the results from the 2007 monitoring can be read at http://www.blm.gov/ca/st/en/prog/blm_special_areas/ccnm.html and is titled "Seabird

Mr. Bob Merrill
page 2

and Marine Mammal Monitoring on Offshore Rock Islands in Sonoma County and Mendocino Counties, California 2007, Preliminary Report Findings And Protocol Documentation.”

Little has been published regarding the impact of fireworks on seabird colonies, and consequently the data gathered by the task force are of great interest. To the credit of the task force, the documentation of its protocol and the publication of its findings are well presented. Of importance is the documented impact of the fireworks on the nesting Brandt’s Cormorants, where 11% of the nests were abandoned at the time of the fireworks event. The documentation by photography, including night photography, indicates that the cormorants reacted quickly and many left the island during the event.

This cormorant colony has been declining since surveys in 1979 and 1980 counted 1,840 and 1,240 birds, respectively, but only 521 in 1989-1991 (Carter et al., 1992). While the reasons for this decline are not clear, seabird breeding failures in the California Current have occurred frequently during the past decades, including a well publicized widespread failure during the summer of 2005. An avoidable disturbance that causes as much as 10% of a population to fail in its breeding attempts is unwarranted.

The Gualala Point Rocks are part of the California Coastal National Monument, established by Presidential Proclamation in 2000 primarily to provide habitat for seabirds and marine mammals. We encourage the appropriate agencies, including the California Coastal Commission, the Bureau of Land Management, the Fish and Wildlife Service and the California Department of Fish and Game, to take necessary steps to insure that these kinds of disturbances are avoided. Please contact us if we can be of further assistance in this regard.

Sincerely,

/s/ Craig S. Harrison

Craig S. Harrison
Vice Chair for Conservation

Carter, Harry R.; McChesney, Gerard J.; Jaques, Deborah L.; Strong, Craig S.; Parker, Michael W.; Takekawa, Jean E.; Jory, Deborah L.; and Whitworth, Darrell, L. 1992. Breeding Populations of Seabirds in California, 1989-1991 Volume I and II, Draft Report.