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Alaska Sea Otters to Get U.S. Protection

By Mary Pemberton
Associated Press

ANCHORAGE, Alaska -- Southwest Alaska's sea otters, which came back from the brink of extinction in the 1800s, are facing another dramatic decline and could be named a "threatened" species as early as Tuesday.

There are no clear answers why the population across a wide swath of Alaska has plummeted or how to reverse the decline, said Douglas Burn, leader of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's sea otter program.

"It is a complex task, partly because we don't know with 100 percent certainty how we got here," Burn said.

Protection as a threatened species under the federal Endangered Species Act is a start to finding those answers.

Once a notice is published in the Federal Register, which Burn expects to happen Tuesday, the Fish and Wildlife Service will be required to come up with a recovery plan.

Southwest Alaska's sea otters have recovered before. They were nearly wiped out by more than 150 years of commercial hunting before receiving international protection in 1911. By the mid-1980s, the population had burgeoned to as many as 129,000.

Today, however, only about 40,000 in-

habit the area extending from the west side of Cook Inlet to the Alaska Peninsula and Kodiak Island, west to the Aleutian Islands and beyond to the Russia-U.S. maritime border.

The move to list the sea otters as threatened follows a 2003 lawsuit accusing the Interior Department of failing to protect them. The Arizona-based Center for Biological Diversity argued that without action, sea otters in the Aleutians and Alaska Peninsula would become extinct.

The recovery plan "is crucial because the problems with the sea otters will not be easy to address," said Brent Plater, a lawyer who led the group's lawsuit.

The situation is particularly dire in the 1,000-mile long Aleutian Island chain, which once had more than 100,000 sea otters. The Fish and Wildlife Service estimated last year that there were 8,800 sea otters in the Aleutians.

Even with the "threatened" designation, subsistence hunting will be allowed, Burn said. About 100 sea otters a year are taken by subsistence hunters in Alaska, most of them in the Kodiak area.

Commercial fishing also does not appear to present a major problem for sea otters, Burn said. A study found that in the hardest hit areas the otters' primary food was sea urchins.

What may be more of an issue is the impact of freighters in the shipping lanes

off Southwest Alaska, Burn said. A fuel spill last year killed several sea otters in the Aleutians.

"It is those types of incidents, that if they happen when the population is particularly small, starts to worry conservation biologists," Burn said.