

Panetta leads butterfly defense

Congressman Jimmy Panetta is calling for the Fish and Wildlife Service to make “substantial investments in monarch conservation efforts.” (Monterey Herald file)

By [STEPHANIE MELCHOR](#) | newsroom@montereyherald.com |

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PACIFIC GROVE — Rep. Jimmy Panetta, D-Carmel Valley, is calling for the Fish and Wildlife Service to make “substantial investments in monarch conservation efforts” to protect the western monarch butterfly from extinction.

In a letter co-signed by Rep. Salud Carbajal and Senator Jeff Merkley and addressed to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Principal Deputy Director Martha Williams, officials made their concern for the Central Coast’s beloved butterflies clear.

“We recommend that the Service invest in science and analysis to determine the most important causes of the decline of the western population,” the letter read in part.

Panetta, a native of Monterey County, remembers growing up surrounded by symbols of the monarch.

“We’ve got to realize that it takes more than just having stickers or pictures or symbols of butterflies,” he said in a phone interview Tuesday. “We’ve actually got to make sure we protect our butterflies.”

UC Santa Cruz professor Marm Kilpatrick (left), Rep. Jimmy Panetta (D-Carmel Valley) (center) and Pacific Grove Mayor Bill Peake (right) speak at the Monarch Grove Sanctuary about the MONARCH Act in 2020. (Monterey Herald archive)

The western monarch can be found nearly all over the western United States. Starting in early autumn, millions of butterflies travel south to California, Mexico and Arizona to overwinter, creating a spectacular display for communities along the Central Coast.

“You wish that other people from around the country were able to experience what we did growing up — visiting the Pacific Grove sanctuary and literally seeing thousands upon thousands of butterflies,” said Panetta. “It’s magical. It’s absolutely magical.”

In the last few decades though, the numbers of western monarchs overwintering in California have been dangerously declining, due in large part to human actions like climate change, destruction of habitat and the use of certain pesticides that are toxic to the butterfly.

“If urgent action isn’t taken immediately to address the myriad of threats the butterfly faces,” says last week’s letter, “western monarchs could disappear in just a few short years.”

Every fall since 1997, the Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation has coordinated the Western Monarch Population Count: a massive volunteer-run effort to count monarchs at hundreds of observation sites up and down the California coast.

Connie Masotti, a citizen scientist and regional coordinator for the Western Monarch Count in Monterey County, remembers camping in Big Sur a few years ago to do the counts. She’d wake up early so she could witness “the amazingness of seeing the sun start to rise and start to glint on the monarchs.” Back then, she was counting butterflies in the tens of thousands. In 2020, she counted 30 in the entire county.

“I would get through doing a count and go to my car and just sit and cry,” she remembered.

The total 2020 count (which included sites in Arizona and Mexico) was 1,914 butterflies.

“There are now more Starbucks in California than overwintering monarchs!” said Stephanie Kurose, a senior endangered species policy specialist at the Center for Biological Diversity in an email. “It’s truly heartbreaking.”

Friends on Capitol Hill

Despite their rapidly dwindling numbers, the iconic orange butterflies have friends on Capitol Hill.

Last week’s letter was not the first time Panetta has sought federal assistance to protect monarchs. In February 2020, he introduced a bipartisan bill called HR 5920 — the Monarch Action, Recovery and Conservation of Habitat (MONARCH) Act. A companion bill in the Senate was introduced by Senator Merkley (D-OR).

The bill called for \$125 million to be set aside for a Western Monarch Butterfly Rescue Fund that would include habitat restoration and education. Half the funds would support the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation’s Western Monarch Butterfly Conservation Plan.

Although the bill died in Congress last year, Panetta said he is planning on reintroducing it within the next few weeks after doing some “fine-tuning” to help it pass this time around.

“It’s going to take a lot of work sooner rather than later,” he said, given the monarch’s rapid depletion in population.

In addition to the dismally low counts released by the Xerces Society, monarch conservationists faced some more bad news at the end of 2020: On Dec. 17, the Fish and Wildlife Service announced that adding monarchs to the endangered species list was “warranted but precluded by work on higher-priority listing actions,” meaning the butterflies will be put on a waiting list and their case revisited in a year.

Their decision was a response to a 2014 petition for monarchs to be federally protected under the Endangered Species Act. The petition was filed by the Center for Biological Diversity, the Center for Food Safety and the Xerces Society.

“Delaying protections for at least another year, which is what the Fish and Wildlife Service essentially is doing, could spell disaster for this iconic pollinator,” said Kurose. She said 47 species have gone extinct while waiting for protections under the endangered species act, the fear being that monarchs could become the 48th.

In 2020, the Western Monarch Thanksgiving Count in 2014 was 234,731, compared to the staggeringly low 1,914 butterflies counted in 2020 — a 99 percent decrease in just six years.

Given how dire the situation seems, Panetta called the decision “exasperating,” and urged Deputy Director Williams to “expeditiously dedicate U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service resources to pollinator conservation and habitat restoration” in last week’s letter.

What can you do?

For Masotti, she’s not holding her breath for the government to take action. “I’m fine if the government agencies come through,” she said, “but I’m not waiting on them. I haven’t been waiting on them.”

There are lots of ways to help monarchs, but Masotti urges locals to do their research before rushing in. Things that seem helpful to the monarchs, like planting milkweed, can actually be harmful if nonnative species are planted (which can harbor parasites that infect the butterflies) or if they are planted too close to overwintering grounds (milkweed encourages butterflies to mate and lay their eggs, which they shouldn’t do in the winter). Masotti said locals should plant native nectar plants instead, which will help other pollinators as well.

In terms of political engagement, locals don’t necessarily need to contact their local congressman about this issue (although Panetta said he always appreciates hearing from his constituents). Instead, he suggested reaching out to friends and family members living in other states and political districts so that they can contact their representatives to support the MONARCH Act and other legislation aimed at protecting monarchs.

Because ultimately, “the monarchs in your backyard aren’t just yours,” said Masotti. “They’re the whole world’s.”