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Americans Overwhelmingly Support Wilderness Protection for Drakes Estero

92% of public comments ask Interior Secretary to honor government's promise to protect wilderness

Point Reyes Station, CA – National Park Service data released today shows overwhelming public support for full wilderness protection of Drakes Estero within Point Reyes National Seashore. Wilderness protection would commence this year, once an existing commercial oyster harvesting company's lease expires. Of the 52,473 public comments submitted on the draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), 92% (48,396) supported ending the private commercial use of the estuary and designating full protection for America's only marine wilderness on the West Coast.

"The people have spoken; and they resoundingly side with the Congressional decision that was originally established in 1976, to permanently protect the estuary," said Neal Desai, Pacific region associate director for the National Parks Conservation Association. "Point Reyes National Seashore is a treasure that belongs to all Americans, and tens of thousands agree it's time to honor the long-term vision for a protected marine wilderness, while we still can."

Amy Trainer, director of the Environmental Action Committee of West Marin added, "Drakes Estero is a valuable part of the natural heritage of West Marin and the National Park System - an industrial-scale commercial oyster operation does not belong in a park wilderness area. If we want future generations to see a slice of California coastline restored to its natural beauty, this is our one shot."

NPS Report: Protecting Wilderness Most Consistent With Law and Policy

The draft environmental review released by the National Park Service last fall stated unequivocally that extending commercial oyster operations within the estuary would damage park policies and goals, and contradict wilderness protection laws. The "no action" alternative, which protects the estuary as wilderness when the oyster lease expires, was identified as the "environmentally preferable" alternative, and the most consistent with law, policy, and science.

Under the 1976 Point Reyes Wilderness Act, Congress directed Drakes Estero's wilderness protection to commence this year. In 2005, the remaining 7 years of the oyster company's operating lease were sold to new investors, the Drakes Bay Oyster Company (DBOC), with knowledge of the sunset date. The new company has since sought an extension, which would prevent the wilderness protections that the area is due under law. A controversial legislative "rider", attached to a massive appropriations bill in 2009, granted Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar sole discretion to issue a new permit for the oyster operation. His decision, based on the final EIS, is expected this summer.

Coastal Commission Pursuing Habitat Violations by Drakes Bay Oyster Company

Earlier this month, the California Coastal Commission rebuked Drakes Bay Oyster Company for violating the California Coastal Act and a 2007 Cease and Desist Order issued by the Commission, and warned of potential penalties and litigation. The oyster company was found to be illegally operating its motorboats near seal habitat during the sensitive pupping season since at least 2008. Previously, the oyster company was warned by the Commission in September 2011 that ongoing illegal use of motorboats near sensitive seal areas poses "serious threats to marine habitats and wildlife." The Commission's recent letter expressed concern that Drakes Bay Oyster Company had failed to address its current and prior violations.

"Point Reyes National Seashore belongs to the public and should not be damaged for one company's profit," said Melissa Samet, senior water resources counsel for the National Wildlife Federation. "The public has made it clear that it wants to protect this special place as required by longstanding law and policy."

For more information: <http://www.savepointreyeswilderness.org/>