

Defenders of Wildlife • National Parks Conservation Association •
Natural Resources Defense Council • Sierra Club • The Wilderness Society

February 28, 2012

The Honorable Ken Salazar
Secretary, Department of the Interior
1849 C Street, N.W.
Washington DC 20240

Re: Full Wilderness Protection for Drakes Estero in Point Reyes National Seashore

Dear Secretary Salazar:

Thank you for providing leadership through your America's Great Outdoors initiative which provides national, regional and local conservation groups an avenue to work with your administration on conservation issues. One specific issue you will be deciding this year involves the only marine wilderness on the West Coast: Drakes Estero in Point Reyes National Seashore. We write on behalf of our millions of members to urge you to decide to bring the area into the National Wilderness Preservation System as intended by law.

Designated a potential wilderness area by Congress in 1976, this remarkable estuary did not receive wilderness protection at that time due to the existing operating rights of a commercial aquaculture business. Congress made it clear, however, that it expected the estuary would become a wilderness when those 40-year rights expired which is in 2012. The public has long honored this leasing deal, awaiting the promise to give all Americans a protected marine wilderness on the West Coast this year. An extension to continue commercial use of the estuary has been requested by the present owner, but this would prevent the wilderness preservation designation that the area is due under law. Their request should be rejected.

The National Park Service's draft Environmental Impact Statement has concluded that providing full Wilderness protection to the Estero once the commercial operating permit expires this year is the alternative most consistent with law, policy, and science. That action is also the "environmentally preferred alternative." Tens of thousands of Americans from around the country submitted comments during the comment period on that draft EIS, asking that you honor the deal and protect this estuary.

Wilderness is rare in the United States, and marine wilderness is even rarer. Drakes Estero will provide opportunities for public access to a marine wilderness near a major urban region, the San Francisco Bay Area, along with enhanced recreation and wildlife watching in the area. The opportunity to uphold park law and policy, while creating significant marine protections for the long-term, should be seized. Drakes Estero can and should be a key component within your America's Great Outdoors efforts.

Thank you for your continued leadership on national parks. We look forward to your decision on this critically important issue.

Sincerely,



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President
National Parks Conservation Association



Frances Beinecke
President
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Michael Brune
Executive Director
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