

Controversy grows over recipe for rodent problem on Farallon Islands: rat poison

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SAN FRANCISCO, CA- APRIL 17: Oceanic Society naturalist Peter Winch, left, points as visitors aboard the Salty Lady view the Farallon Islands on Saturday, April 17, 2021 off the coast of San Francisco, Calif. (Jane Tyska/Bay Area News Group)

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Isolated from the frenzy of San Francisco by 30 miles of ocean, the Farallon Islands appear desolate from a distance — nothing more than a rocky silhouette against the setting sun. But up close, the islands are bursting with life. Petrels, gulls, cormorants, murres and tufted puffins are just a few of the species that make the Farallones the largest seabird colony in the contiguous United States, earning it the moniker “the Galapagos of California.”

But the federally protected islands are besieged by tiny furry invaders — house mice, about 60,000 of them. They were most likely introduced by sailors in the early 19th century who came here to harvest everything from blubber to pelts to seabird eggs.

Now, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has a controversial plan to exterminate them. It wants to rid the South Farallon Islands of the mice by dropping from a helicopter nearly 1.5 tons of pellets laced with a potent and controversial rat poison called brodifacoum — enough to kill every last mouse.



Black and white murre are seen on the Farallon Islands on Saturday, April 17, 2021 off the coast of San Francisco, Calif. (Jane Tyska/Bay Area News Group)



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“I think it’s a fabulous idea,” said Mikko Bojarsky, a high school oceanography teacher from Santa Rosa who joined a recent expedition to the marine habitat surrounding the Farallones sponsored by the San Francisco-based Oceanic Society. “We need to become tenders of nature and use our knowledge and wisdom to undo some of the damage that we brought about.”

But the plan has carved an unexpected crevasse among environmentalists who care deeply about the welfare of the islands and the surrounding Greater Farallones National Marine Sanctuary. To move forward, the project needs the blessing of the California Coastal Commission, which is poised to make a decision in the fall.

The project’s supporters say removing the mice would restore an ecosystem that the rodents are gradually destroying, threatening a rare seabird called the ashy storm petrel. But opponents view the “poison dump” as an affront to the stringent protections of both the Farallon Islands National Wildlife Refuge and marine sanctuary.

“I don’t know if they would carpet bomb Yellowstone or Yosemite in order to deal with a mouse problem,” former U.S. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta, the most high-profile critic of the project, said in an interview.



Sea lions lounge on the Farallon Islands on Saturday, April 17, 2021 off the coast of San Francisco, Calif. (Jane Tyska/Bay Area News Group)

U.S. Fish and Wildlife formally proposed the project to the Coastal Commission at a July 2019 meeting, but agency officials are only now returning to seek the panel's approval after commissioners raised a litany of concerns.

"We are afraid of this poison," Commissioner Dayna Bochco said then. "We have seen what it's done."

Indeed, brodifacoum is so ecologically damaging that Gov. Gavin Newsom last year signed a law banning its use on the mainland. But the legislation included an exception for island conservation projects.

The poison's short-term, isolated use on the Farallon Islands won't have the ecological impacts of its persistent presence on the mainland, where it's been a go-to tool for controlling rodent populations everywhere from subway tunnels to fruit orchards. But the toxin is certain to kill some native wildlife on the islands, particularly Western gulls. Critics are also concerned that gulls that consume the toxin will wind up dead on the mainland, where their carcasses could poison birds of prey, bobcats, mountain lions and other wildlife.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife says it plans to significantly reduce the number of dead gulls by "hazing" the birds to keep them away from the ubiquitous poison. The agency's arsenal includes lasers, spotlights, fireworks, air cannons, effigies, kites — even trained falcons or bird-hazing dogs if necessary.



A tufted puffin is seen near the Farallon Islands on Saturday, April 17, 2021 off the coast of San Francisco, Calif.
(Jane Tyska/Bay Area News Group)

The hazing is just one of the many mitigations proposed in the \$1.2 million, 300-page environmental impact report created by the agency — the culmination of years of research and planning since the mouse eradication project was conceived in 2004.

The battle lines have only hardened in the two years since the faceoff with the Coastal Commission over the plan to dump poison on the South Farallon Islands, which comprise 120 acres of the 211-acre wildlife refuge.

“We don’t create a marine sanctuary to let bad things happen in them without a fight,” said Richard Charter, a senior fellow at the Ocean Foundation, headquartered in Washington, D.C. A vociferous opponent of the project, Charter spent much of his career advocating for marine sanctuaries alongside Panetta.

As a Central Coast congressman three decades ago, Panetta was integral in protecting California’s coastal waters from offshore drilling and establishing the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary — the largest such sanctuary in the U.S.

“I can’t believe that science can’t give us some options here that would allow us to do this and still be able to protect the wildlife on the Farallones,” Panetta said.



Structures are seen on the Farallon Islands on Saturday, April 17, 2021 off the coast of San Francisco, Calif. (Jane Tyska/Bay Area News Group)

Some critics of the project argue that U.S. Fish and Wildlife should use contraceptives to drive down the mouse population without causing the deaths of native wildlife. But agency scientists say that wouldn't fully eradicate the mice, so the survivors would quickly reproduce.

Mice now compete with or prey upon the islands' endemic animals, such as the Farallones' arboreal salamander and cave cricket. They spread invasive plant seeds and prevent native plants from flourishing.

They also serve as a plentiful food source to the burrowing owls that stopover on the islands during their fall migration to warmer southern climes. Tantalized by the mouse buffet, the owls linger longer than they normally would. And when the mouse population plummets in the winter, the burrowing owls seek new prey: the ashy storm petrels.



Hundreds of black and white murrelets are seen on the Farallon Islands on Saturday, April 17, 2021 off the coast of San Francisco, Calif. (Jane Tyska/Bay Area News Group)

Though not yet federally listed as endangered, there are only around 10,000 ash-storm petrels in the world, and about half of them nest on the Farallones. Scientists at Point Blue Conservation Science, a conservation nonprofit based in Petaluma, estimate that the owls kill at least 100 of the slow-breeding birds each year. The scientists say if the trend isn't reversed, the petrel population could decline by as much as 63% over the next 20 years.

In recent decades, about 85% of the nearly 200 projects that relied on brodifacoum distributed by aircraft have been successful. Anacapa Island, part of Channel Islands National Park off the coast of Ventura County, was the site of North America's first such project in 2002. Run by Santa Cruz-based Island Conservation, the project resulted in a rebound of seabird populations.

Alaska's Hawadax Island was known as Rat Island until Island Conservation exterminated its invasive rodents. But victory came with a cost. Following the project, field crews recovered 420 native bird carcasses laced with rat poison, including 46 federally protected bald eagles.

If and when the mice and other animals on the Farallon Islands ingest the blood-thinning brodifacoum, they will bleed to death internally over the course of several days. Pete Warzybok, the Farallones program leader for Point Blue, acknowledges the suffering to come, but he believes the poison's short-term negative impacts

are outweighed by the long-term benefits to the ecosystem.

Warzybok has spent more nights on the Farallon Islands than anyone else in modern history —more than 2,400 days so far during his career with Point Blue, which maintains a small group of scientists on the island to monitor natural resources.

“It’s been my home for 20 years, and I care very much about what happens out there,” he said. “I think this is a really important project that needs to happen and needs to happen soon.”



SAN FRANCISCO, CA- APRIL 17: A gray whale is seen near the Farallon Islands on Saturday, April 17, 2021 off the coast of San Francisco, Calif. (Jane Tyska/Bay Area News Group)

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