

MEMORANDUM



October 15, 2021

TO: Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission |
FROM: Robert Bailey, Elakha Alliance
SUBJECT: Status of Elakha Alliance Activities

Overview

The Elakha Alliance is an Oregon-based non-profit incorporated in 2018 with a mission "to restore a healthy population of sea otters to the Oregon coast and to thereby make Oregon's marine and coastal ecosystem more robust and resilient." In simple terms, while we love the fact that sea otters are cute and popular with the public, our aim is to bring them back to Oregon in order to restore and protect the productivity, resilience, and diversity of Oregon's nearshore marine ecosystem as well as restore the cultural connections between coastal Indian people and sea otters. The broader historical, ecological and cultural context for the Elakha Alliance is described in [this article](#) in Open Spaces magazine.

Members of our [board of directors](#) have backgrounds in government, wildlife conservation, law, and academia. Three are members of Oregon coastal Indian tribes. The Elakha Alliance received IRS approval as a tax-exempt 501(c)(3) organization in April, 2020.

Strategic Plan and Initiatives

In 2019, with funds from the Meyer Memorial Trust, the board developed and adopted a strategic plan after an extensive process with key partners. The strategy includes three strategic initiatives: 1) Complete scientific assessment and public policy analysis necessary to determine the feasibility and impacts of restoring and protecting a healthy sea otter population in Oregon; 2) Build regional consensus that a restored, healthy Oregon sea otter population is an important goal worth pursuing.; and, if these two are achieved, 3) Complete a restoration of a viable, sustaining population of sea otters to a few suitable places on the Oregon coast. A summary of the strategic plan is [linked here](#).

Current Status:

Strategic Initiative 1, Scientific assessments:

A Feasibility Study (FS) was identified in the strategic plan as a top priority to assemble and assess all pertinent information into one document for the public, stakeholders, government agencies and interested parties. The key elements of the FS were identified at a workshop with sea otter experts and practitioners at a regional sea otter conference in Seattle in March 2019.

In early 2020 the Elakha Alliance received funding from the US Fish and Wildlife Service to support work toward FS. Additional funds were received from other sources, including the Oregon Conservation and Recreation Fund. In late 2020 a FS team consisting of a principal author and contributing authors were contracted to produce the FS based on parameters derived at the Seattle workshop. Team members are world-class experts in all facets of sea otter research, conservation and management. A Scientific and Technical Advisory Committee, including an ODFW staff member, was created to advise the FS team on a wide range of issues.

On August 30, 2021, a DRAFT Feasibility Study was released to the public via the [Elakha Alliance website](#) for review until November 30, 2021. A final Feasibility Study is planned by the end of January. This document will provide the basis for a wide range of initiatives and activities by the Elakha Alliance. The study is also intended to be used by state and federal agencies in future decision-making about sea otter restoration in Oregon. Last week, October 5, 6, 7, 2021, the EA held an on-line Sea Otter Science Symposium to highlight and discuss many of the scientific issues identified in the FS. All presentations were recorded and will be available on [our YouTube channel](#), along with videos of presentations at our two previous symposia.

Strategic Initiative 2, Consensus building:

In late 2019, the Elakha Alliance received a two-year award from Meyer Memorial Trust for community engagement and public outreach. Additional funds have since been received to support this initiative. The Elakha Alliance hired a full-time Director of Outreach and Community Engagement in early 2020 to begin to implement the many aspects to consensus building identified in the strategic plan. Our director has been engaged in a wide range of public communication activities including [a website](#) (with the goal of having the world's most complete website devoted to sea otter and kelp ecosystem conservation), organizing on-line webinars, creating content for several social media platforms, and other activities. We are optimistic that, in time, we will be able to resume in-person outreach activities along the coast and throughout Oregon. In the meantime, we operate in a virtual environment.

In addition, the Elakha Alliance is taking an important step by seeking to hire a South Coast Community Liaison. Because the FS indicates that the southern Oregon coast has the preponderance of suitable sea otter habitat in Oregon, the Alliance is committed working with the communities of southern Coos and Curry counties to develop and maintain relationships critical to reach public consensus about returning sea otters.

Some Next Steps:

The Elakha Alliance awaits the final Feasibility Study in January as well as an Economic Impact Assessment currently underway and will then confer with its external Advisory Committee, state and federal agencies, and partners about next steps.

But based on the draft FS, it appears that at least two new science-based activities need to be pursued. One is to work with ODFW staff and others to develop amendments to the Oregon Nearshore Conservation Strategy to account for the importance of kelp and eelgrass as crucial habitats, rather than Strategy Species, as well as the return of sea otters to enable the recovery of kelp forests in Oregon.

A second area of activity will be to develop a research and monitoring plan to help guide funding requests for research and monitoring prior to and after release of sea otters. The Alliance will assemble an advisory group for this task.

In addition, the Alliance will continue its outreach activities while seeking funds to support targeted initiatives with coastal Indian tribes and with key ocean users, especially commercial and recreational fisheries.