

Frequently Asked Questions



Invasive Species Eradication for Habitat Restoration on Poa and Sud Islands

Updated 2/27/2010

What is being planned?

Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge, part of the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, is planning to restore bird-nesting habitat and natural biodiversity on 2 small islands, Poa and Sud, off the coast of Alaska by eradicating introduced hoary marmots and European rabbits. These introduced animals are competing with native seabirds for burrows, interfering with nesting and egg laying, causing nest abandonment and altering native vegetation.

When will this happen and how long will it take?

We plan to spend about two months at each island in the spring of 2010. However, the eradication operation may occur in more than one year.

Rabbit trapping on Poa will take place in early spring before puffins began nesting to minimize the risk of capture or disturbance of puffins and other nesting birds. The Sud Island project for hoary marmots will begin in mid May, after marmots emerge from hibernation and begin foraging above ground. Although Tangik Island, another rabbit island, was also evaluated in the *Environmental Assessment* of the project, there are no plans for work on Tangik.

How was this decided and how can I learn more?

A website has been established to keep the public and media updated on the action. Visit <http://alaskamaritime.fws.gov/rabbits>. An *Environmental Assessment* providing details on the proposed action and a no action alternative was released on January 9, 2010, for a 30-day public comment period. After review of the public comments, *A Finding of No Significant Impact* approved the project and was signed on February 17, 2010. The *Environmental Assessment* and *Finding of No Significant Impact* can be found online at the above address. Paper copies can be requested by calling us at 907-235-6546 or mailing us at Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge, 95 Sterling Highway, Suite 1, Homer, AK 99603, or e-mailing us at alaskamaritime@fws.gov.

How did the public react to the Environmental Assessment?

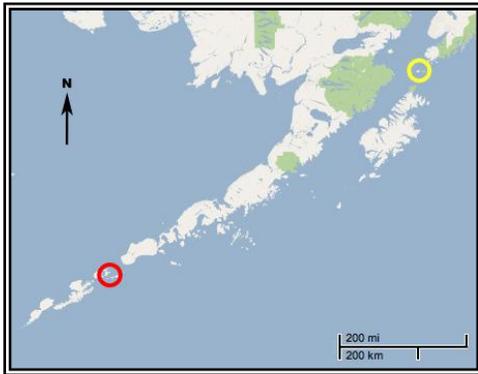
Of the 16 responses, 14 were in support of the proposed action, 1 respondent was opposed, and 1 respondent proposed a third alternative—to conduct more research before determining whether to proceed. Based on public comments received, the effects of this action on the quality of the human environment are not highly controversial. More can be read about the public review process and comments and the Fish & Wildlife Service's response to the comments in the *Finding of No Significant Impact*.

Frequently Asked Questions Poa and Sud 2

How does this fit with the Refuge's purpose?

One of the purposes of Alaska Maritime Refuge is to conserve seabirds, other migratory birds, marine mammals and habitat upon which they depend. Seabirds are abundant on Refuge islands with colonies sometimes numbering in the millions. Most of North America's seabirds nest on the Refuge. To support this purpose, the Refuge's goal for this project is to restore native habitats through removal of introduced animals such as European rabbits and introduced hoary marmots, and restoring seabird-nesting habitat.

Where are the islands?



Poa Island (red circle) is a small uninhabited island in the eastern Aleutian Islands, 735 miles from Anchorage, Alaska and one mile from the east coast of Akun Island. Sud Island is an uninhabited island in the Barren Island Group (yellow circle), between Kodiak and the Kenai Peninsula near the entrance to Cook Inlet, 175 miles from Anchorage.

What is special about the islands?

Seabirds flourish on small islands off the coast of Alaska because they provide relatively predator-free habitat not found on the mainland or larger islands such as Akun and

Akutan. Additionally, most islands like Poa and Sud have no native land mammals to compete with seabirds for burrows. However, the European rabbits introduced to Poa and the hoary marmots introduced to Sud Island change natural island vegetation and disturb nesting birds.

What birds will benefit from this proposed action?

Tufted puffins, rhinoceros auklets, ancient murrelets and other burrow-nesting seabirds are most likely to benefit after the introduced animals are gone.

Aren't rabbits and marmots native to Alaska?

European rabbits are not native to Alaska. They have been introduced throughout the world but they are native to southwest Europe. Alaska has native snowshoe hares (*Lepus americanus*) and Alaskan (tundra) hares (*Lepus othus*), but they do not occur in the Aleutian Islands. Hoary marmots (*Marmota caligata*) are native to parts of Alaska and some islands but not to the Barren Islands. Sud Island is the only island in the Barren Islands where marmots were stocked.

When and why were European rabbits and hoary marmots introduced to the islands?

European rabbits were stocked on Tangik and Poa islands about 1940, possibly for hunting or as food for introduced foxes. The Alaska Game Commission introduced hoary marmots on Sud Island in 1930 for an unknown reason, but it was at a time when the Commission had a program to release game and fur animals on Alaska islands.

Frequently Asked Questions Poa and Sud 3

How have the introduced hoary marmots and European rabbits changed the islands?

These invasive mammals compete for burrows and displace native nesting seabirds. As the introduced animal population increased, grazing increased, causing changes in native vegetation and natural nutrient cycling.

On Sud Island, marmots are the suspected cause for the near disappearance of a colony of more than one thousand rhinoceros auklet (*Cerorhinca monocerata*). Only a handful of auklets remain today. This was the only known colony of this species in the region.

On Poa, the impact of grazing rabbits is particularly apparent along the upper coastal cliffs favored by tufted puffins and other burrow nesters such as ancient murrelets. European rabbit and hoary marmot grazing on Poa and Sud islands has removed plant cover from around seabird burrow entrances, which increases exposure and risk of mortality of seabird nestlings and possibly reduces burrow stability because of increased erosion.

How will the introduced hoary marmots and European rabbits be eradicated?

Traps and shooting will be used. Poison will not be used.

Is there other wildlife on the islands that might be harmed?

There are no other land mammals on these islands, except river otters (*Lutra Canadensis*) are known to occasionally visit Sud Island. Bald eagles, Steller sea lions, and sea otters are not likely to be adversely affected by this action. However, some unintentional non-target take or disturbance is possible. Non-target animals captured in traps or snares would be released unless it would not survive.

Can European rabbits and hoary marmots be live-trapped and relocated?

The Alaska Department of Fish Game and the US Fish and Wildlife Service have strict policies against relocation of wildlife. Non-native rabbit and hoary marmot relocation could have negative ecological impacts on native species at their new location. Relocation of non-native species is not biologically sound. Expense of relocation operations adds cost to the project without increased eradication effectiveness.

Can you erect fences to keep rabbits and marmots away from seabirds?

Fencing would be expensive to install and maintain on steep terrain and along the islands' coasts of these remote islands. Fencing against marmots or rabbits would require a portion of the fence to be buried, which impacts nesting seabird habitat. Fencing can be a hazard to birds. Also, the non-native animals would still negatively impact natural biodiversity on these islands.

Does the refuge have any experience at this?

The refuge has over 50 years of experience restoring island habitats by removing introduced species. Introduced foxes have been removed from more than 40 refuge islands restoring over one million acres of habitat. Seabirds on some of these islands have increased four and five fold since foxes were removed. The Aleutian cackling goose was saved from near extinction; whiskered auklets which were once rare are now locally common; and the Evermann's rock ptarmigan has been successfully reintroduced to fox-free habitat. This proposed action builds on the success of these other refuge restoration projects.

Frequently Asked Questions Poa and Sud 4

How much will the eradication projects cost?

Excluding cost for administration support of the program, the rabbit eradication operation will cost \$138,000 and the marmot eradication operation will cost \$46,000. Funding for this project and hundreds more wildlife habitat improvement projects across the nation will come from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. Of the \$3 billion appropriated to the Department of the Interior, the Act provides \$280 million for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Who do I contact to find out more information?

Contact Steve Delehanty, Refuge Manager at the e-mail, address, or phone number below, or Steve Ebbert, Invasive Species Biologist, at the same contact information.

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