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Increased federal funding planned for endangered Hawaiian monk seal

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By **Coco Zickos - The Garden Island**

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LIHU'E — In response to conservation efforts for America's most endangered marine mammal, Hawai'i is expected to receive some \$5.7 million for fiscal year 2009 to support the NOAA Hawaiian Monk Seal Recovery Plan.

The funding marks a \$3.6 million increase over last year's amount.

Monk seals are currently "red listed," said Dr. Mimi Olry, who heads the Marine Mammal Stranding Network on Kaua'i and serves as the island's Hawaiian monk seal coordinator.

The listing means they are a critically endangered species and face an extreme risk of extinction, she said.

With only about 1,100 remaining, unless greater efforts are taken the Hawaiian monk seal may soon follow in the footsteps of the Caribbean monk seal's untimely extinction.

The Hawaiian Monk Seal Recovery Plan serves to provide extensive public outreach and education programs, coordinate monk seal response volunteer groups and help respond to pupping events and haul-outs.

The focus of the recovery plan is to increase pup and juvenile survival by mitigating threats to the seals, a press release this week states. With greater funding, more assistance can be provided to seals including detangling them from nets, fishing lines and hooks, and responding to any situation where seals are threatened by humans.

Keiko Bonk, Hawai'i program director for the Marine Conservation Biology Institute — which has been leading the public campaign for greater funding — said the increase is substantial compared to previous years and will be a great help to the monk seal's survival.

"It's the first time we've had such a substantial increase and it indicates that there is a will to recover the seal," she said. "Prior to this, the budget was pretty stable; most of the money went to the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands for research."

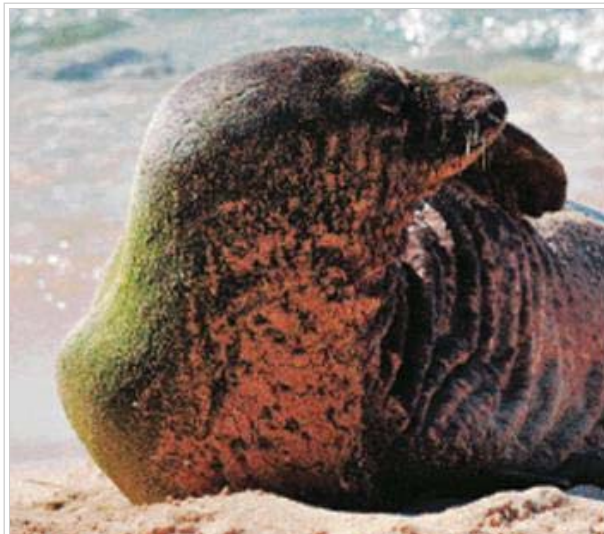
More funds can now be allocated to the Main Hawaiian Islands, including Kaua'i where additional education and public outreach are needed.

This will allow the program to continue on its path and will enable NOAA to hire a lead recovery coordinator and pay for the response and volunteer coordinators needed throughout the Main Hawaiian Islands.

Olry said the extra money would also serve to provide more supplies needed to set up protection areas for the endangered mammal.

Bonk said Olry has done such an excellent job in spreading awareness about the Hawaiian monk seal on Kaua'i that more support is inevitable.

The Northwestern Islands will benefit from an increase as well in that a recovery team will regularly be sent out to monitor and manage the monk seals rather than periodically overseeing activity.



A Hawaiian monk seal awakens from a nap at Po'ipu Beach Park in this January 2008 photo. The U.S. House has appropriated \$5.7 million for FY09 to help fund recovery efforts for the endangered species. Dennis Fujimoto/The Garden Island

Bonk said none of this would have been possible without the support of Sens. Daniel Inouye and Daniel Akaka, and Hawai'i Reps. Neil Abercrombie and Mazie Hirono.

Inouye, chair of the U.S. Senate Appropriations Committee, has been a lead defender of the seal, a news release states. In response to public concern that the seal's numbers have been declining for 30 years despite being on the endangered species list, Akaka, Abercrombie and Hirono also weighed in to support more recovery funding.

"This unified delegation support has made all the difference," said Bonk, in a written statement. "The appropriated funds will not only help save our sacred seal, it will provide jobs in Hawai'i for ocean scientists and students, on a project that will last until the species has fully recovered, and enriching our understanding of our oceans and its inhabitants in the process."

The Omnibus Appropriations Act of Fiscal Year 2009 would provide \$35.8 million for America's protected species and management programs, which is \$1.03 million above the request. The National Marine Fisheries Service is directed to utilize no less than \$5.73 million for the Hawaiian monk seal. The Hawaiian monk seal may be one of the world's most endangered marine species and the agency has not provided adequate funding to reverse its decline, according to a written statement attached to the bill.

Bonk said the bill has already passed the House and its fate now rests with the Senate and President Obama for final approval.

When asked if Bonk believed it would continue through she said she didn't see anything indicating otherwise and hopes the funding will be secured for subsequent years.

"The public and the community have really made a difference in the conservation for the monk seals, particularly the volunteers that devote so much of their time and are so committed to taking care of the marine environment and the seals that are a part of that," said Olry.

To participate in helping these endangered species or to report a stranded or injured marine mammal, call 651-7668.

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