

**The Sierra Club
National Parks Conservation Association
Environmental Action Committee of West Marin
Center for Biological Diversity
Marin Audubon Society
Marin Conservation League
Sonoma County Conservation Action
People for a Golden Gate National Recreation Area, Petaluma
Wilderness Watch
Natural Resources Defense Council
California Wilderness Coalition
Planning and Conservation League
Bluewater Network**

August 28, 2006
The Honorable Barbara Boxer
United States Senate
Hart Building, Suite 112
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Boxer:

A major goal for our organizations, representing environmental concerns at the state, local and national level, is to protect and enhance America's National Park System for present and future generations. As you know, there are too few areas left in the world that have wilderness status. Wilderness protects native ecosystems from habitat loss and commercial development while providing clean air, clean water and quiet recreational opportunities. Here in California, Point Reyes National Seashore (PRNS) is one such place that is blessed with wilderness, and we are writing to encourage non-interference with the congressionally mandated designation of Drakes Estero as wilderness in 2012.

Having been established in 1962 to "preserve, for the purposes of public recreation, benefit, and inspiration, a portion of the diminishing seashore of the United States that remains undeveloped," PRNS has been successful in serving the various stakeholders and user groups the park's enabling legislation intended it to serve. In the 1976 Point Reyes Wilderness Act (Public Law 94-544) Congress designated 25,370 acres as wilderness, and 8,002 acres as potential wilderness. Among the potential wilderness is Drake's Estero. The legislative history (House Report 94-1680) indicates Congressional intent: "it is the intention that those lands and waters designated as potential wilderness additions will be essentially managed as wilderness, to the extent possible, with efforts to steadily continue to remove all obstacles to the eventual conversion of these land and waters to wilderness status." In addition, the zoning for the estuary in the General Management Plan (GMP, 1980) calls for its conversion to wilderness where no mechanized equipment or development is to occur. Currently, however the estero is occupied by

Drakes Bay (formerly Johnson) Oyster Company until 2012, when its lease expires and the Estero is intended to revert to full public use as wilderness.

Drake's Estero is an extremely valuable recreational and biological resource and is unique in that it is the only estero along the entire West Coast designated as a wilderness area. Every other estero has been compromised by development and commercial use. The Estero and its watershed is already home to several endangered plants and animals, contains one of the most populous harbor seal haul-outs on the Central California coast, and serves as an important bird habitat and stop-over on the Pacific Flyway. It could and should be further protected and enhanced by the long-planned designation as wilderness, which requires removal of the 1050 acres commercial oyster operations from the midst of a National Park.

Recently, there have been a flurry of ill-advised proposals assaulting America's public lands, such as plans to open the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to oil drilling, to sell and commercialize 15 national park units, to open national parks for mining, and to open our the National Marine Sanctuaries offshore Marin for oil exploration. But thanks to the voices of Americans from sea to sea, these reckless ideas were rejected. Now we find we must raise our voices again to oppose yet another ill-advised proposal to continue past 2012 a commercial oyster growing in what should be a wilderness area in PRNS. A proposal that, to be successful, would require congressional language overriding and going against previous legislation created with significant public input. Such a change in federal law would set a precedent similar to those mentioned above and would become yet another example of the assault on our public lands by private interests. The Park Service has provided the commercial oyster company with 40 years (until 2012) to move and/or cease operations in the Estero. We ask your help to ensure that in 2012 Drakes Estero will return to its congressionally intended wilderness status.

California has a long and proud history of wilderness preservation and your continued support will ensure that present and future generations continue to enjoy the tremendous benefits of the Drakes Estero Wilderness.

Sincerely,

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