

Successful Bald Eagle Breeding Plan at San Francisco Zoo Completed as Remaining Birds Fly East

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A highly successful bald eagle breeding plan at the San Francisco Zoo that resulted in the reintroduction of over 100 bald eagles to the Channel Islands concluded on June 18 when 9 adult birds took a donated FedEx plane ride to a new home at the American Eagle Foundations (AEF) U.S. Eagle Center in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee.

The 16-year plan was a successful partnership between the Zoo and the U.S.F.W.S. (Service) that helped re-establish the countrywide symbol in many areas of the west. Many other partners participated in the plan over the years, providing backing and expertise to help the plan become a success, including the Institute for Wildlife Studies, California Department of Fish and Game, Santa Cruz Predatory Bird Research Group, Ventana Wildlife Society, Bald Eagle Working Group, and the Montrose Settlements Restoration Plan (MSRP). Since 1991, in excess of 100 bald eagles from the Zoo have been re-introduced to the wild on the Channel Islands. The Zoos Plan was the only large-scale captive breeding Plan for bald eagles in the western United States.

The San Francisco Zoo has been a wonderful wildlife partner in restoring our countrywide symbol, said Steve Thompson, California-Nevada Operations Manager for the Service. The Zoo has again demonstrated how partners, in cooperation with the Service, are key to restoring healthy wildlife populations.

"The San Francisco Zoo is recognized to have been associated with the recovery of the bald eagle in California and thrilled to know that these birds will continue to help the species recovery efforts in the Southern United States," said John Aikin, director of conservation at the Zoo. "We are extremely proud of the Zoo's Avian Conservation Center staff who have performed vitally important work including research, field study, breeding and species management. It has been a thrilling and humbling experience for all of those involved."

Currently about 70 bald eagles live on the Channel Islands. In the last 2 years 7 chicks have hatched naturally. Starting in 1991, bald eagles raised at the San Francisco Zoo were reintroduced to Santa Catalina Island. This reintroduction Plan was then expanded in 2002 to include deliveries on Santa Cruz Island.

This bald eagle reintroduction effort was funded by the MSRP, a multi-agency Plan dedicated to restoring natural resources that were harmed by the release of millions of pounds of DDTs and PCBs into the ocean by the Montrose Chemical Corporation and other industrial sources in southern California in the mid 20th century.

In 1990, the Services Environmental Contaminants Plan undertook an extensive Natural Resource Damage Assessment. After ten years of negotiations a settlement was reached, and Montrose and the other defendants agreed to pay \$140 million to offset the damage. The Montrose Settlements Trustee Council, a group of state and federal agencies which

includes the Service, is responsible for using these funds to restore the natural resources (including bald eagles) injured by the pollutants.

Until 2006, the last successful bald eagle hatching in the wild on the Channel Islands occurred in 1949. By the early 1960s pollution, primarily DDT that caused thin-shelled eggs, had eliminated the birds from the islands.

The Avian Conservation Center (ACC) at the Zoo acquired its 1st female bald eagle for the captive breeding Plan in 1985 from a wild nest in California. Since that time, the number of birds has steadily increased. Most recently the ACC has cared for ten breeding bald eagle pairs. Kathy Hobson of the ACC and curator John Aikin have been instrumental in the success of the breeding program.

Today California is home to an estimated 200 pairs of nesting bald eagles. Throughout the lower 48 states there are nearly 10,000 nesting pairs, a 50 per cent increase since 2000. The species reached its low point in 1963 when only 417 pairs could be found in the lower 48.

The Service is on track to make a final determination on the bald eagles status under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) by June 29. It is currently a threatened species and the Service has suggested to remove it from that list because of its recovery. Countrywide Bald Eagle Management Guidelines and careful monitoring Plan would continue to protect the bird, as well as its status under the 1940 Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act.

The U.S.F.W.S. is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System which encompasses 544 National wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 Countrywide fish hatcheries, 63 fishery resource offices and 81 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces Federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid Plan that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to State fish and wildlife agencies.