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Public Participation Crucial in The Marine Mammal Center's Harbor Seal Health Study

(Sausalito, Calif.—July 26, 2007) The Marine Mammal Center's marine biologist, Denise Greig, is conducting a study of the effects of pollutants and environmental factors on San Francisco Bay Area harbor seals, and is requesting the help of the public to report sightings of the seals along the California coast. The Harbor Seal Health Project will attempt to shed some light on the prevalence and health effects of marine contaminants in the San Francisco Bay area. The rehabilitated seals included in the study are released with brightly colored hat-shaped tags, numerically coded so each animal can be identified easily in the wild. Members of the public who view one of the seals outfitted with the tags should take care not to disturb the animal. They are asked to note the number and color of the tag, the location of the sighting, and the general condition of the animal, and report the data to The Marine Mammal Center at (415)289-7350 or sealhat@tmmc.org.

“The harbor seal's coastal habitat is influenced by human-produced pollutants including sewage, agricultural and surface runoff, and industrial pollution,” says Greig. “Our study may tell us if exposure is affecting seal health, and the seals in turn may tell us about possible impacts on human health. If the seals are affected by pathogens and contaminants in the marine environment, then it is possible that people, who feed at the same level in the food chain, could be affected as well.”

In May, June, and July, harbor seals were released wearing the hats, as well as short-range radio tags to track them locally. How they and future seals released with the hat tags fare is all part of the data that Greig will collect. The data collection relies heavily on community outreach and awareness of the program. The effectiveness of the public in reporting sightings of the seals will be an essential factor in the success of the program.

About The Marine Mammal Center:

Headquartered in the Golden Gate National Recreation Area in Sausalito, California, The Marine Mammal Center is a nonprofit veterinary hospital, research and educational center dedicated to the rescue and rehabilitation of ill and injured marine mammals - primarily elephant seals, harbor seals and California sea lions - and to the study of their health. Patients that become healthy again are released back to the ocean. Since 1975, the center has rescued and treated thousands upon thousands of marine mammals and has accumulated a body of knowledge about marine mammal and ocean health from its patients. By educating the public about marine mammals, the center hopes to foster ocean stewardship and conservation. The Marine Mammal Center is supported almost entirely by private funds. For more information, visit www.marinemammalcenter.org

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