

As biologists with over 30 years of collective experience working on the Farallon Islands and marine ecosystems, we wish to clear up some misconceptions about the proposed mouse eradication on the Farallons. House mice are invasive pests that are upsetting the natural balance of a unique island ecosystem and harming native wildlife, including ash storm-petrels and burrowing owls.

The Farallon Islands are one of two places in the world where ash storm-petrels breed. The mice make it possible for burrowing owls, predators of ash storm petrels, to live on the island. Because of predation, there are fewer ash storm petrels today than there were 30 years ago.

Some burrowing owls migrating from mainland breeding areas arrive on the Farallons in fall and, finding a good food supply of non-native house mice, winter here. The cyclic house mouse population crashes with the winter rains, and the owls begin predating on the petrels, which are returning to the islands to breed. The situation is bad for petrels and owls. Many burrowing owls starve or are killed by gulls in the spring. By eliminating the artificial food supply provided by the mice, individual owls landing on the island during the fall would continue migrating to more suitable mainland wintering areas.

Although most mice will die underground and be unavailable to scavengers like gulls, we understand that there will likely be collateral damage to some gulls. Fortunately, gulls are not a rare species and they are resilient. Impacts to other native wildlife can be avoided by timing the project to occur when few birds are present, and formulating the bait to be unattractive to species other than mice.

Careful, well-planned aerial application of a chemical agent targeting non-native mice is the most environmentally sensitive way of undoing the damage they have caused. Some may think that there is a more environmentally friendly way to get rid of the mice. Unfortunately, our experience shows this not to be the case.

Manual removal of thousands of the mice is not possible on this remote, complex habitat. The rodents live in steep rocky crevices and other underground habitats inaccessible to humans. Attempting to trap mice would entail placing thousands of mouse traps in fragile wilderness areas never or seldom visited by humans occupied by hundreds of thousands of nesting seabirds and marine mammals. The traps would have to be checked several times a week for many months, and this human activity would frighten seabirds and marine mammals from breeding areas, and spread seeds of invasive plants. The fragile habitats damaged by such human activity would take many years to recover.

In contrast applying an agent specifically made to be eaten by mice - not other wildlife - could be done in a matter of hours, not months, thereby avoiding disturbance to the native species. To restore native ecosystems, invasive species have been successfully and safely removed worldwide by the same techniques currently being proposed for the Farallon Islands. We therefore we support this effort.

Joelle Buffa, Retired Manager Farallon National Wildlife Refuge

William J. Sydeman, PhD. President and Senior Scientist Farallon Institute