

Feinstein seeks to benefit Drakes oyster farm

Martin Griffin

Wednesday, September 23, 2009



Sen. Dianne Feinstein needs to remove her rider in the Interior Appropriations Bill that wrongly benefits Kevin Lunny's private Drakes Bay Oyster Company. She's extending his lease for 10 years in Drakes Estero, the public wilderness heart of the Point Reyes National Seashore.

The removal will force the end of Lunny's lease in 2012 as intended by Congress in 1976, returning the public trust tidelands to wilderness status. Private inholdings of this sort are a grave threat to the integrity of our beloved national parks.

Her rider sets a dangerous precedent opening the seashore to private opportunists. Lunny's lease extension may be as risky as allowing citizens to carry guns in the national parks.

Magnificent Drakes Estero shelters the largest rookery of breeding and pupping harbor seals on the North Coast. It is a refuge for thousands of migratory ocean birds, its mud shoals home to hundreds of species of invertebrates, nourished by cold tidal water from the ocean beyond. This remote paradise is spoiled by the traffic trying to reach Lunny's misplaced oyster bar.

I strongly support family farms within the seashore but oppose shellfish farms in the wildlife-rich tidelands of Drakes Estero. While oysters may be a moneymaker, there are other waters - Tomales Bay - where oysters may be grown and sold just as profitably. Lunny's is the only private tidelands-based industry in the park.

The fight to save Point Reyes and West Marin (1957-76) was a major land-use battle to prevent its Los Angelization. The public was thrilled when state Sen. Peter Behr in 1972 collected 500,000 signatures, persuading President Richard Nixon to complete the purchase of the National Seashore. The 1976 Point Reyes Wilderness Protection Act set aside areas within the seashore for federal wilderness status: limited access, no development, no commerce. It stated: "In terms of preserving and protecting marine life systems, Drakes Estero and Limantour Estero could well be considered the most significant ecological units within the national seashore."

Some 16 major environmental organizations including the Sierra Club, the Natural Resource Defense Council, the Wilderness Society and Marin Audubon Society are profoundly saddened by the prospect of Drakes Estero - so close to being protected by the Wilderness Act - falling back under the wheels of private commercial exploitation.

It's ironic that the adjoining Limantour Estero enjoys full wilderness status.

Johnson Oyster Company was due to terminate its lease in 2012. Lunny knew this when he bought the company. Isn't the effort to extend this lease a violation of good faith and public trust?

Shouldn't this valuable gift to a private individual of public lands, worth millions of dollars, be fully debated by Congress? As we know, riders are slipped into bills to avoid public and congressional debate.

The scientific studies that Feinstein ordered on Drakes Estero do not justify this rider. This is a political act.

Please view Ken Burns' new documentary, so aptly titled. "National Parks: America's Best Idea."

Martin Griffin is the co-founder of Audubon Canyon Ranch and the Environmental Forum of Marin, and author of "Saving the Marin-Sonoma Coast."

<http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2009/09/22/EDQH19QPPH.DTL>