NET ENVIRONMENTAL BENEFITS ANALYSIS SPECIES FACT SHEET:

NORTHERN RIVER OTTER (*Lontra Canadensis)*

I. Species Description

North American river otters are semi-aquatic mammals, with long, streamlined bodies, thick tapered tails, and short legs. They have wide, rounded heads, small ears, and nostrils that can be closed underwater. The whiskers are long and thick. The fur is dark brown to almost black above and a lighter color on the underside. The throat and cheeks are golden brown. The fur is dense and soft, effectively insulating these animals in water. The feet have claws and are completely webbed. Body length ranges from 35 to 51 inches and tail length from 12 to 20 inches. Weight ranges from 11 to 30 lbs. Males average larger than females in all measurements.

River otters are found in Canada, Alaska, the Pacific Northwest, the Great Lakes states and along the Atlantic coast and Gulf of Mexico. Vegetation adjacent to rivers, streams, lakes, and other wetland areas are key habitats. Adult males live along large stretches of river, often up to 40 to 50 miles. Females are not as mobile. Their home ranges are only 3 to 10 miles depending on habitat quality and the time of year. They travel a lot but spend most of their time at activity centers with abundant food and cover. Examples of these centers include logjams, oxbows, pools below dams or spillways, and springs or riffles that stay free of ice all winter.

River otters eat mainly aquatic organisms such as amphibians, fish, turtles, crayfish, crabs, and other invertebrates. Birds, their eggs, small terrestrial mammals, and sometimes aquatic plants are also eaten on occasion. Prey is eaten immediately after capture, usually in the water, although larger prey is eaten on land.

II. Sensitivity to Oil and Other Spills

River otters spend a great deal of time swimming and diving in for food. Their fur can become oiled while in the water, resulting in a loss of insulation and hypothermia. In addition, river otters groom frequently and can ingest oil as a result. While they prefer live prey, they are also opportunistic feeders and potentially will eat oiled carrion, especially during the winter and spring. Ingestion of hydrocarbons during the grooming process or through feeding on contaminated prey items may result in digestive-tract irritation, neurological effects and physiological changes, which in turn, may lead to organ injury, dysfunction, and death. Aromatic hydrocarbons are capable of causing inhalation injury and may cause death before either hypothermia or ingestion injuries affect the animals.

III. Sensitivity to Response Methods

Methods Causing Least Adverse Impacts

Boom Deployment
- Control the movement of floating oil to prevent or reduce contamination of species.

Skimming
- Recover floating oil from surface to prevent or reduce contamination of species.

Physical Herding
- Free oil trapped in vegetation or debris to move away from sensitive areas.

Vacuum
- Minimal effects to wildlife if foot and vehicular traffic is controlled and minimal substrate is removed.

Manual Cleaning/Removal
- Oiled debris should be removed to prevent scavenging and the ingestion of oil.

Methods Causing Some Adverse Impact

In-Situ Burning
- If used, include either wildlife hazing in burn area or capture of oiled wildlife.

Shoreline Cleaning Agents
- Wildlife may contact cleaning agents and/or bioremediation substances used for shoreline treatment.

Sorbents
- Likely disturbance of habitat during deployment and retrieval. Use should be monitored to prevent overuse and generating large volumes of waste.

Scare Tactics
- Increased stressing of wildlife may lead to shock and fatalities.

Methods Causing Probable Adverse Impact

Natural Recovery
- This method may be inappropriate for areas where high numbers of mobile animals (birds, terrestrial mammals) or endangered species use the body of water or shoreline.

Vegetation Removal
- Will destroy habitat for many animals. Cut areas will have reduced plant growth. Trampled areas will recover much more slowly.

Sources

State of Illinois, Illinois Department of Natural Resources, Illinois Furbearer Guide: River Otter, Accessed February 8, 2006 at, http://www.dnr.state.il.us/orc/wildlife/furbearers/river_otter.htm

http://www.epa.gov/oilspill/pdfs/chap5.pdf

Ellis, E. and T. Dewey. 2003. "Lontra canadensis" (On-line), Animal Diversity Web. Accessed February 27, 2006 at http://animaldiversity.ummz.umich.edu/site/accounts/information/Lontra_canadensis.html.

http://www.great-lakes.net/partners/epa/acp-rcp/app_VI.html#2.0