



Testimony on Oregon Pinnipeds
House Committee on Agriculture and Natural Resources
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On behalf of the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) and our Oregon supporters, I am here to voice our position on the issue of pinnipeds (seals and sea lions), their impacts on native fish populations, and proper management considerations.

The Spring Salmon Runs That Are Subject to Predation Are Not Declining

The NMFS has estimated that approximately 25-30% of the fish in the spring run are listed under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). In its most recent annual report to Congress in 2012, the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) stated that the ESA-listed salmon that migrate up the Columbia in the spring are all stable or increasing in size. [See: http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/laws/esa/noaa_esa_report_072213.pdf, page 10]. The spring salmon runs have increased since the original 2004 NMFS assessment of predation impacts and some recent years have shown record sized runs. [See Table 3 at: http://www.nwd-wc.usace.army.mil/tmt/documents/fish/2014/sealion_final-report_9-16-14.pdf] Predation is not adversely impacting the trend in run sizes.

Unaddressed Competition and Predation by Non-Native Fish Poses a Greater Threat Than Predation by Sea Lions or By the “4 H’s”

Salmon declines were caused by habitat degradation, hydro-electric power, harvest practices and poorly conceived hatchery programs that may actually compete with wild salmon (called the “Four H’s”) and these factors continue to slow recovery, particularly because recommendations for changes in hatchery management and harvest strategies made by a Congressionally appointed blue ribbon panel have largely been ignored. However, a published study by NMFS scientists concluded that up to 2 million juvenile fish are eaten each year by non-native fish and that “managing non-indigenous species may be imperative for salmon recovery”. Rather than trying to eliminate this source of predation on salmon, bag limits on the catch of most of these species are imposed by the states to ensure their continued presence and, consequently, their continued predation on salmon.

Regarding the lack of management attention to reducing this threat, the study’s lead author stated in an interview: “We’re not interested in taking on the recreational fishing industry.” [From: <http://fishbio.com/fisheries-news/regional-fisheries-news/non-native-fish-pose-substantial-threat-to-salmonids>]

Claims of High Rates of Predation Away From the Dam Are Inflated

Predation rates are monitored near the Bonneville Dam, but there is little monitoring elsewhere. At the Dam, scat [fecal waste] studies show that salmonids are close to 100% of their diet. An energetic model of consumption based on their consumption of salmonids at the Dam cannot be used to estimate predation in the waters well away from the Dam where salmon are a minor part of the diet. We know from studies of sea lion scat at Astoria nearer the mouth of the river, that salmon comprise as low as 20% or less of what they eat. [see: <http://www.nwfsc.noaa.gov/publications/techmemos/tm28/appf.htm>]

Further, analysis of data from satellite tags on sea lions shows that those travelling the 144 miles from the East Mooring Basin at the mouth of the river to the Dam do so in two days' time or less which would give little time for them to pause and eat [See: <http://www.mediate.com/DSConsulting/docs/Wright%20et%20al%202010%20CSL%20movements%20NWS%2084-1%2060-72.pdf>]

There are recent news reports that indicate up to 45% of acoustically tagged salmon do not make it to the Dam, however the author of the study herself has acknowledged that, because the “pings” of the transmitters can be heard by seals and sea lions, they may be targeting those fish. If so, the loss rate for the tagged fish would not necessarily be representative of losses to the run itself which could be at substantially lower levels.

In addition, though some have claimed that fish escaping attempted predation by a sea lion are injured and will subsequently die, researchers have found to the contrary that “injury was not consistently associated with adult survival to spawning tributaries.” [See; http://www.fishsciences.net/reports/2011/CJFAS_68_1615-1624.pdf]

In sum, the estimates of predation at the Dam may not capture all of the predation on salmonid in the river, but studies of their movements and diet downriver indicate that salmon are only a small part of their diet elsewhere in the river and it is not clear that losses sustained by acoustically tagged fish are representative.

Predation IS Not Progressively Increasing

Observed predation as a percentage of the spring run—which is the best measure of impacts to fish and is the same measure used for setting fishing quotas—has declined since the 4.4% rate that was estimated when the lethal permit was first requested in 2007. According to the federal government, predation by Steller and California combined was barely 2% of the run in the past two years. In 2014, fewer salmon were eaten by Steller and California sea lions than all but 2 years of the past 8. Even in 2011, when a court ruling prevented killing for that year, predation by both species was still less than 2%. [See: Table 3 at: http://www.nwd-wc.usace.army.mil/tmt/documents/fish/2014/sealion_final-report_9-16-14.pdf]

Sea Lions eat Far Fewer Fish Than Fishermen are Permitted to Kill

Although some charge that sea lions are eating “too many” fish, observed predation has been estimated at only about 2% of the spring run. In the same years, fishermen have been given harvest quotas that ranged from 12% to as high as 17%. In 2014 the quota was 12%. This level of

impact has been found by courts to be “negligible.” It makes little sense to say that an observed 2% predation rate is unsustainable when run sizes have been at *record highs* in recent years and fishermen can legally kill six or more times the amount that sea lions are observed to eat.

Sea Lions Come and Go from the Dam. There’s Not a Small “Rogue” Group Whose Removal Ends Predation.

The number of both California and Steller sea lions fluctuates annually. In 2012 and 2013 the greater presence of the larger Steller sea lions appears to have resulted in fewer California sea lions at the Dam. The number of days an individual sea lion spent at the dam is also decreasing (at a mean of 5.4 days, it is the lowest since 2002). Observations from the Army Corps of Engineers indicate that up to 70% of sea lion seen at the Dam are new individuals that were not identified in prior years. In 2014, 63% were new to the Dam. Most had never before been seen there and thus were not habitual “offenders.” [see: http://www.nwd-wc.usace.army.mil/tmt/documents/fish/2014/sealion_final-report_9-16-14.pdf] Much like squirrels interacting with a backyard bird feeder; if there is food there, others will come even if one or more are removed. Lethal control is simply not effective in preventing predation.

Asking for a Halt to the Lethal Predator Control is Not Choosing to Protect Sea Lions Over ESA-listed Fish

It is precisely because we *do* care about the fish that we object to killing sea lions. We want to see meaningful action taken to speed the recovery of the ESA-listed fish. Killing sea lions won’t to that. The government needs clean up salmon habitat and take steps to address long-ignored recommendations from scientists for hatchery and harvest reform and for removing the non-native fish that compete with and eat the salmon. These things will hasten salmon recovery in a way that killing sea lions will not. Sea lions consume less than 4 percent of the spring run and kill far fewer fish than fisheries, dams and non-native fish. Killing sea lions simply wastes time and money—and the lives of the sea lions—while making little difference for the fish.

Thank you for receiving my testimony, and I am happy to answer any questions.