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NATIONAL OCEANIC & ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION • US DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

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NOAA Considers Ways to Handle Sea Lions That Threaten Protected Salmon

NOAA's Fisheries Service is asking for public comment as it considers four alternatives to deter California sea lions from eating imperiled salmon and steelhead that congregate below the Bonneville Dam on the lower Columbia River as they head upriver to spawn.

The agency's draft environmental assessment issued today responds to requests in 2006 from Washington, Oregon and Idaho to kill predatory sea lions under a provision of the marine mammal law. Of the four alternatives, NOAA is recommending the states use lethal removal only on individual sea lions that continue to eat salmon after deterrence methods are not successful. An estimated 30 nuisance animals would be killed annually.

During the past three years, NOAA's Fisheries Service and other state, tribal and federal agencies have tested non-lethal deterrence methods to discourage the sea lions from foraging at the dam, but these efforts have been largely unsuccessful. Close to a third of the salmon and steelhead eaten by the sea lions are from stocks listed under the Endangered Species Act and considered important for the survival of the species.

Under the Marine Mammal Protection Act, states can ask for permission to kill individually identifiable sea lions or seals that are having a "significant negative impact" on at-risk salmon and steelhead, and NOAA's Fisheries Service can grant that permission, if certain legal standards are met.

NOAA's Fisheries Service convened a special task force last fall to make recommendations about the states' request. Nearly all task force members said last November that the federal agency should grant the states' request.

Today's draft environmental assessment lays out these four alternatives:

- Take no action. With this alternative, the states' request would be denied and no further aggressive hazing would be undertaken to deter predation at the dam. Only minimal deterrents, such as existing underwater noisemakers and sea lion barriers at the dam's fish ladders, would remain.
- Non-lethal deterrence only. This alternative would also deny the states' request, but would continue active hazing of animals at the dam, including use of firecrackers, rubber bullets, noisemakers and capture, holding and relocation of animals.
- Lethal removal of certain California sea lions after non-lethal deterrence. This is the alternative NOAA Fisheries Service proposes, and would allow the states to kill individually identified sea lions, either directly by shooting them, or by euthanizing them once they had been captured, if no permanent holding facility for them could be found. The agency estimates that about 30 animals could be killed per year under this alternative.

- Lethal removal of all California sea lions within about five miles of the dam, with no requirement for prior deterrence. This alternative is similar to what the states requested and several task force members recommended; it would affect perhaps as many as 150 animals.

Under both alternatives that approve killing California sea lions, specific safety measures would be put in place and an animal-care committee, approved by NOAA's Fisheries Service, would be established to advise on standards for humanely capturing, holding and killing predatory sea lions.

The agency is asking for public comment on its draft environmental assessment until Feb. 19. It is expected to make a final decision on the issue in late March. Copies of the draft and how to comment are on the Web at:

<http://www.nwr.noaa.gov/Marine-Mammals/Seals-and-Sea-Lions/Sec-120-draft-EA.cfm>

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On the Web:

NOAA's Fisheries Service: <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov>