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NATIONAL OCEANIC & ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION • US DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

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NOAA Says Three States Can Remove Certain Sea Lions That Threaten Protected Salmon

NOAA's Fisheries Service is granting authorization requested by Washington, Oregon and Idaho to permanently remove a number of California sea lions that are eating imperiled salmon and steelhead congregating below Bonneville Dam before moving up the Columbia River to spawn.

Today's action allows these states to target only individual sea lions that continue to eat salmon after deterrence methods have proven unsuccessful.

The agency's authorization responds to a request in 2006 from the three states to "lethally remove" predatory sea lions under a provision of the Marine Mammal Protection Act. Under this authorization, the states may shoot or capture and remove individually identified sea lions preying on salmon below Bonneville Dam.

Under the marine mammal law, 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.

Any animals that are captured may be euthanized if no permanent holding facility can be found for them. NOAA's Fisheries Service and representatives of zoos and aquariums are compiling a list of pre-approved permanent holding facilities interested in receiving a limited number of captured sea lions as an alternative to euthanasia. NOAA has authorized the states to remove as many as 85 animals annually, but estimates that only about 30 animals will be removed each year, given the conditions in its authorization.

The states will implement specific safety measures and form an animal-care committee, approved by the agency, to advise on standards for humanely capturing, holding and killing predatory sea lions.

Building on more than two decades of experience in attempting non-lethal deterrence of sea lions in the Pacific Northwest, NOAA's Fisheries Service along with state, tribal and other federal agencies, tested a wide range of non-lethal deterrence methods to discourage the sea lions from foraging at the dam, but these efforts have been largely unsuccessful.

State and federal biologists conservatively estimate sea lions ate at least four percent of returning adult fish at Bonneville in 2007 – nearly 3,900 fish – up from an estimated half a percent just six years ago. The actual number is likely much higher, since many fish kills by sea lions were out of sight of observers.

Sea lions injure fish, as well as kill them. According to observers, monitoring salmon and steelhead migrating past the dam, fish with scars from sea lions have increased from 11 percent in 1999 to 37 percent in 2005. 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.

As part of the marine mammal law's requirements, 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. NOAA released a draft proposal for public comment in January that included as one of its four alternatives the action it is authorizing today.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, an agency of the U.S. Commerce Department, is dedicated to enhancing economic security and national safety through the prediction and research of weather and climate-related events and information service delivery for transportation, and by providing environmental stewardship of our nation's coastal and marine resources. Through the emerging Global Earth Observation System of Systems (GEOSS), NOAA is working with its federal partners, more than 70 countries and the European Commission to develop a global monitoring network that is as integrated as the planet it observes, predicts and protects.

EDITORS NOTE: Public documents pertaining to this authorization, including the *Federal Register* language, letter of authorization to the states and more are available online at: <http://www.nwr.noaa.gov/Marine-Mammals/Seals-and-Sea-Lions/Sec-120-Authority.cfm>

On the Web:

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