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October 4, 2004

**To:** Council Members  
**From:** Peter Paquet  
**Subject:** Avian Predation Management Issues

### **Action**

No action required. This item is for discussion only.

### **Background**

At its meeting in Seattle last month, the Council heard several reports on the predation of juvenile salmonids by several species of fish-eating birds. A report by the Corps of Engineers focused primarily on the lower river and estuary and the management strategies for Caspian Terns, which is the current subject of Environmental Impact Statement which describes potential strategies for reducing tern predation on juvenile salmonids. Additionally, they discussed the increasing populations of Double-crested cormorants and the corresponding increased consumption of juvenile salmonids (See, <http://.migratorybirds.fws.gov/CATE.htm>) for a detailed summary of the issues). Dr. Julia Parrish, of the University of Washington presented findings from the mid and upper Columbia indicating that while terns and cormorants were not a significant problem in that area, other species, common mergansers and several species of gulls were (See material from Seattle Council meeting). The referenced material provides summaries of the problem, as well as a discussion of the proposed solutions. Additionally, as reported at the last meeting, the current draft Biological Opinion calls for the increased use of predator control to increase mainstem survival of juvenile fish.

### **Discussion**

At the Seattle meeting several issues were raised by both Council members and the presenters that have potential short and long-term policy implications for the Council's Fish and

Wildlife Program. Staff has identified several of these potential issues that it believes merit further discussion.

- **Caspian Tern EIS** – The comment period for the Draft Caspian Tern Environmental Impact Statement ended on September 20<sup>th</sup> and the USFWS hopes to have the final document completed by January, 2005. However, the preferred alternative relies on a strategy which calls for relocating birds to other geographic areas in Oregon, Washington and California, including areas outside the historical breeding range. Currently, the management agencies in those states have indicated that they would only be willing to accept birds in areas in which they historically occurred. This could lead to a situation where it could be impossible to implement the EIS preferred alternative. When they made their presentation in Seattle, the Corps contingent specifically asked for the Council's help in resolving this issue. Is this a role that the Council wishes to take on? What are the implications for managing Caspian Terns in FY 2005? Are there short-term alternatives?
  
- **Regional Approach to Avian Juvenile Fish Predation** – The problem of avian predation on juvenile salmonids is not limited to the Lower River and estuary. There are a variety of avian species that are predatory on juvenile salmon and they occur throughout their range. The vast majority of these birds are native to the Columbia and Snake rivers and they are natural predators salmonids. However, because of human activities which have both altered existing reproductive habitat and created increased habitat for many of these species, they have greatly expanded both their geographic and population size. Although Caspian terns and Double-crested cormorants have received the most attention to date, recent studies in the Mid-Columbia indicate that both gulls and mergansers may be of significant concern whereas, terns and cormorants may have no significant impact on juvenile fish. Additionally, we are faced with increasing populations of Double-crested cormorants in the estuary, which are diminishing the effectiveness of the tern relocation program.

While we are faced with a number of these problems in varying locations throughout the basin there is currently no regional strategy for addressing the issue of avian predation. Dr. Parrish, in her presentation to the Council suggested that such an approach could provide a more integrated approach to the problem. What role, if any, should the Council take in promoting a regional strategy?

- **Budget Issues** – All of the above, as well as several other eventualities could have short or long-term impacts for the Fish and Wildlife Program budget. Increased emphasis on predator control in the recent draft Biological Opinion is likely to cause a shift in budget priorities for the federal implementing agencies. The increasing numbers of Double-crested cormorants will mean that additional research and population analysis will be required, as well as the initiation and completion of an EIS for population redistribution and implementation of the preferred alternative. As we learn more about the impact of other species, similar efforts for those species may need to be initiated. This raises questions such as: Who should pay for these initiatives? What are the hydrosystem responsibilities? Would a regional strategy be more cost effective?