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December 6, 2022

MEMORANDUM

TO: Council Members

FROM: Mark Fritsch

SUBJECT: Report on sea lion predation and management in the Columbia Basin

BACKGROUND:

Presenter: Doug Hatch, CRITFC
Casey Clark, WDFW

Summary: Doug and Casey representing the team implementing the joint permit authorizing removal of sea lions from Columbia River waters, will provide a brief history on sea lion predation on salmon, steelhead and white sturgeon in the Columbia Basin and management actions to date, including implementation and other issues. Other team members - Meagan West and John Edwards (WDFW), Paul Ward (CRITFC), Mike Brown (ODFW), and John Powell (IDFG) - will be available for questions.

Relevance: This topic is related to one of the seven emerging program priority areas in the [Investment Strategy](#) of the 2014 Fish and Wildlife Program – “preserving program effectiveness by supporting expanded management of predators”. Our continued understanding of in-river sea lion populations is important as we consider management for fish and pinniped interactions.

Workplan: Fish and Wildlife Division preliminary work plan 2022; Program Implementation; and Pursue implementation of 2014 Program and 2020 Program Addendum, including Council Program priorities.

Background: In 1994, Congress amended the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA), adding section 120, which established a process for authorizing the intentional lethal take of individually identifiable pinnipeds that have a significant negative impact on the decline or recovery of salmonid fishery stocks (16 USC § 1389).

In March 2008, fish and wildlife managers in the Columbia River Basin received federal authorization under Section 120 of the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) to remove sea lions that have been observed preying on salmon and steelhead below Bonneville Dam. The federal authorization allowed the fish and wildlife managers to use lethal measures to remove sea lions that meet specific criteria¹. The authorization is guided by the Pinniped-Fishery Interaction Task Force (Task Force). The Task Force is composed of NOAA Fisheries staff, independent scientists, representatives from affected conservation and fishing communities, tribes, states, and others.

In June 2019 the fish and wildlife managers requested authorization for more flexibility in effectively managing California and Steller sea lions predation and proposed to reduce the existing habituated population and to manage proactively by not allowing new animals to habituate within the mainstem Columbia River and select tributaries. The expected benefit of sea lion removal program in the Columbia River basin is to reduce or eliminate a source of mortality to listed and non-listed fish species.

In 2020, PL 115-329 was passed into law that allowed government agencies to lethally remove Steller and California Sea Lions in select locations of the Columbia and Willamette Rivers. Under this new law, the states of Washington, Oregon, and Idaho, and the Nez Perce Tribe, the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, the Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs Reservation of Oregon, and the Confederated Tribes and Bands of the Yakama Nation are eligible to apply for a permit from NOAA Fisheries to remove predatory sea lions on the Columbia River and specified tributaries.

More Info:

- Council Topic [Article on Sealions](#), 2018
- [Pinniped-Fishery Interaction Task Force, Bonneville Dam](#) – publications 2007 to 2022
- Marine Mammal Protection Act [Section 120 Pinniped Removal Program: Columbia River and Willamette River](#)

¹ Removal of problem sea lions has proven to be the most effective means of protecting fish from predation. While exclusion gates keep sea lions out of the fishways, other non-lethal deterrents such as pyrotechnics and rubber buckshot fired at them have only a temporary effect.