

Conservation Concerns Related to Recovering Pinniped Populations

Since enactment of the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) in 1972, some pinniped populations on the West Coast have increased considerably. With increasing abundance of sea lions and seals, have come increasing conflicts with human activities and with the conservation of other resources. At its 2018 annual meeting, the Commission focused on conservation concerns caused by larger numbers of pinnipeds and the expansion of their ranges. The discussion at the Commission meeting focused largely on predation of endangered and threatened stocks of salmonids within the Columbia River Basin. Lethal removal of individually identifiable California sea lions that are having a significant negative impact on endangered and threatened fish stocks at Bonneville Dam has been authorized by the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) under section 120 of the MMPA. NMFS is now considering issuing a similar authorization to allow removal of predatory sea lions in the vicinity of Willamette Falls. The discussion at the Commission meeting also considered pending legislation (H.R. 2083 and S. 1702) that would expand the ability of three States and six Tribes or tribal organizations to remove sea lions to protect salmon listed under the Endangered Species Act and other, non-listed fish species.

Presentations on the situations at Bonneville Dam and Willamette Falls and on pending legislations were followed by a panel discussion with representatives from NMFS, Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, Humane Society of the United States, and Northwest Power and Conservation Council. Among other things, panelists considered (1) whether sea lion removals at Bonneville Dam had been successful in reducing salmonid predation and, if not, what might be done differently, (2) what lessons had been learned at Bonneville Dam that might be applied to the situation at Willamette Falls, (3) whether pending legislation was targeting the right pinnipeds, at the right places, and at the right times to successfully address predation problems, and (4) the extent to which we should be concerned about emerging conservation conflicts elsewhere (e.g., prey competition between pinnipeds and southern resident killer whales, or steelhead predation by harbor seals in Puget Sound).