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Lethal Removal of Sea Lions Necessary to Ensure Survival of Endangered Salmon Populations in Pacific Northwest

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Today, the House Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife, Oceans and Insular Affairs held a legislative hearing on [H.R. 946](#), the “*Endangered Salmon Predation Prevention Act*,” a bipartisan bill introduced by Natural Resources Committee Chairman Doc Hastings to protect endangered Columbia River salmon from predation by California sea lions.

Endangered salmon populations in the Pacific Northwest travel up the Columbia River to spawn by way of the Bonneville Dam at the mouth of the river. Since the passage of the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA), formerly endangered California sea lion and Pacific harbor seal populations have recovered to near historic levels and ventured beyond their natural habitats for food. The result has been increasing numbers of California sea lions camping out at Bonneville Dam to gorge on endangered fish. Pacific Northwest residents spend nearly \$1 billion annually to protect the salmon, yet non-lethal methods have proven inadequate in protecting the endangered salmonid populations.

“Great progress has been made to recover salmon, as witnessed by several consecutive years of record or near-record runs. Yet, growing numbers of aggressive sea lions are consuming endangered salmon. The Army Corps of Engineers reported late last year that the average number of sea lions observed at Bonneville Dam over the past three years increased by nearly 50% – from 83 to 124 per year ... H.R. 946 and this hearing today are designed to find a common sense path forward to protect our substantial investment in salmon recovery and provide federal, state, and tribal fish managers the tools necessary to control sea lions,” **said Chairman Doc Hastings (WA-04).**

Witnesses at the hearing agreed that the lethal removal of California sea lions from the Columbia River effectively reduces salmonid predation and is necessary to protect the endangered populations. *“The benefit of a law that enables efficient and timely permanent removal of California sea lions that travel far inland to feed on wild salmon is to reduce a recent and significant source of mortality and avoid compromising the ongoing federal, state and tribal efforts to recover ESA-listed salmon and steelhead populations in the Columbia River basin,”* said **Guy Norman, Regional Director of the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife.**

James Lecky, Director of the Office of Protected Resources in the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s (NOAA) National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), testified that seal and sea lion populations along the west coast are healthy and

may be at or near carrying capacity yet salmonid populations are on the decline and at risk. In fact, over half of the 52 recognized salmonid populations spawning in California, Oregon, Idaho, and Washington are listed as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act. Lecky also recognized NOAA's unsuccessful efforts at protecting salmonids from seals and sea lions through non-lethal methods: *"Over the years, NOAA has worked diligently with states and others to explore non-lethal methods for deterring pinnipeds from preying on listed salmonids. Unfortunately, these efforts have yielded limited success."*

In her testimony, **Robin Brown, Program Leader for Marine Mammal Research and Management with the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife**, noted that California sea lions are not native to the Columbia River, having infiltrated the river within the past 40 years due to population growth. *"Only over the past ten years have more than just two or three California sea lions been observed feeding below Bonneville Dam, 145 miles up the Columbia River from the Pacific Ocean."*

Salmonid populations are an integral part of the cultural, economic and spiritual well-being of the four Columbia River treaty tribes. **Virgil Lewis, Sr, Commissioner of Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission**, spoke of the importance of robust salmon populations to the economic wellbeing of the tribes. *"Salmon fishing has long been a traditional way of providing the necessary means to safeguard our families economically. Even the settlers who descended upon our ancestral homelands capitalized on the abundant salmon runs to secure an economic foothold in the region,"* said Lewis. *"The growing level of sea lion predation can devastate the hard earned value of the tribal commercial fishery."*

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