

STEELHEAD RUNS PLUMMET



STATESMAN JOURNAL FILE

The number of steelhead returning to the North Santiam is at its lowest level in recorded history.

Lowest numbers counted for Santiam, Willamette systems

ZACH URNESS
STATESMAN JOURNAL

It's been a historically bad year for one of Oregon's most beloved fish on the Santiam and Willamette river systems. Steelhead, both native and hatchery-raised, are returning in the lowest numbers since fish counts began in the 1970s, fisheries managers said.

"The steelhead run has basically crashed," said Dave Carpenter, a fishing guide on the North Santiam River. "We've seen ups and downs over the years, as you do any place. But this is the first year we've seen such a dramatic drop. We've never seen anything even close to this bad."

In an average year, about 5,600 wild winter steelhead are counted crossing Willamette Falls. This year, it was around 800.

Hatchery-raised summer steelhead usually return about 18,000 fish per year. This year, the count stands at 1,100 (although fish will continue to be counted through July).

"We've known this was coming," said Bruce McIntosh, deputy fish chief of inland fisheries for the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife. "And it's been as bad or worse than we thought."

Two main factors have led to the decline, McIntosh said. Four years of poor ocean conditions — including the so-called "blob" of warm water in the Pacific Ocean — played a big role. Multiple years of drought, including the historic drought of 2015, only made the problem worse.

In other words, steelhead that migrated to the ocean as smolts around 2013 have found precious little food.

"The fish we've seen coming back are often skinny and clearly struggling to make a living out there," McIntosh said.

At the same time runs have dropped, the number of sea lions feasting on steel-

head at Willamette Falls has increased. McIntosh said sea lions ate 20 to 25 percent of the steelhead run this year.

"That's off the charts," he said. "While passage at federal dams remain the primary constraint to recovery for winter steelhead, California sea lions have emerged as a significant new threat to their survival in the last decade."

It's unclear whether steelhead numbers will rebound next year. While there are some signs of ocean conditions recovering, fish runs during the next two years will likely be smaller than normal, McIntosh said.

New rules to save steelhead?

The question officials and local guides are grappling with is whether regulation changes limiting fishing could help the beleaguered fish.

Carpenter, a fishing guide on the Santiam, said he's stopped offering steelhead trips even though it's a major part of his business.

"This year I canceled five steelhead trips just because I could see the writing on the wall," Carpenter said. "It's taking money out of my pocket, but it was easy to see the fish weren't coming. Protecting this resource far outweighs my personal gain."

Carpenter said ODFW should take more proactive action. He's worried spawning fish could be accidentally caught and injured by anglers targeting trout, salmon and hatchery summer steelhead. He suggested a fishing closure during winter steelhead spawning, "or at least move to artificial fly, lure and single hook during that period," he said.

"In a typical year, people are out throwing gobs of bait for spring chinook and summer steelhead," he said. "The chance of a (wild winter fish) being accidentally caught or unknowingly harvested is pretty high."



PHOTO COURTESY OF ODFW

Sea lions have been eating steelhead at Willamette Falls in ever greater numbers.

State officials seek permit to remove fish-eating sea lions

ZACH URNESS
STATESMAN JOURNAL

State wildlife officials are seeking permits that would allow them to remove and take lethal action against California sea lions at Willamette Falls.

The animals have become a threat to the survival of endangered fish that pass the falls en route to the Upper Willamette watershed, officials said.

This year, sea lions ate an estimated 20 to 25 percent of the wild winter steelhead waiting to enter the fish ladder, said Bruce McIntosh, deputy fish chief of inland fisheries for the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife.

"That's off the charts," McIntosh said. "It's been an issue for at least five years, but we've reached the point recently where it's become a crisis."

The number of sea lions at the falls has jumped from just a few animals to more than 40 during the past year, in an area where they can easily target fish returning to the ocean.

"(Willamette Falls) is a predator trap, they've got them right where they want them and can just kind of hone in," McIntosh said. "Under the current rules, we can do a variety of hazing methods, but it hasn't had much of an impact."

While sea lions are most commonly associated with the ocean, they range far from salt water in search of fish and have historically trolled Willamette Falls and far up the Columbia.

It wouldn't be the first time state officials sought lethal action against sea lions for eating fish.

Five years ago, Oregon and Washington received federal authorization to kill sea lions for eating salmon at Bonneville Dam on the Columbia River. Officials trapped and euthanized 54 sea lions in 2016.

Under current rules, ODFW must document the impact for three years before applying for the special permit.

The agency has done that, McIntosh said, and could get approval to take ac-

tion as early as next winter.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Fisheries Service will make the final decision.

"It will be a big decision for them," McIntosh said. "None of us want to pit one animal against another, but when you see this type of impact, there's no choice but to look for all the tools available."

The Humane Society of the United States opposes culling sea lions and filed a lawsuit to prevent action at Bonneville Dam that ultimately failed.

"What troubles us the most about killing sea lions is that they're using it as a distraction from the real problems facing the fish," said Sharon Young, marine issues field director for Humane Society. "They're not adequately addressing the real problems, which is dams, habitat loss, over-fishing and ocean conditions."

"They're basically trying to put a Band-Aid on a hemorrhage. It might be satisfying, but it's not going to change anything for the fish."

McIntosh said it was a matter of sea lions getting habituated to an easy meal at the falls. The number of sea lions there has steadily increased, despite hazing efforts that included "sea-lion bombs," rubber bullets and chasing them off.

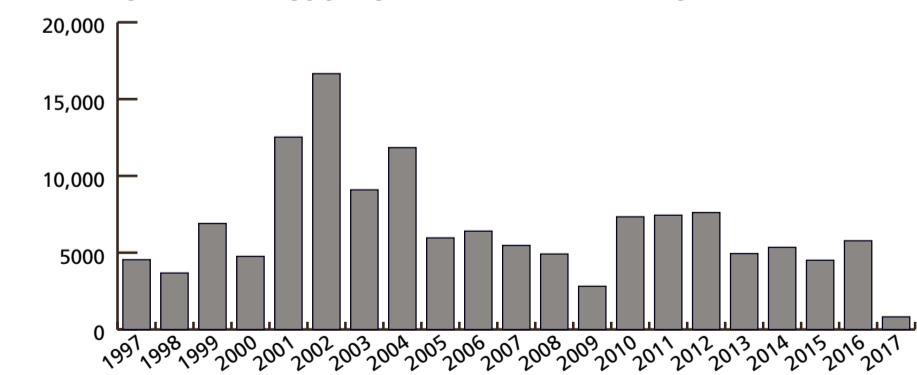
This year, officials used a trap to catch sea lions and relocate them.

He also noted that the sea lions captured will be made available to marine parks and zoos before lethal action is taken.

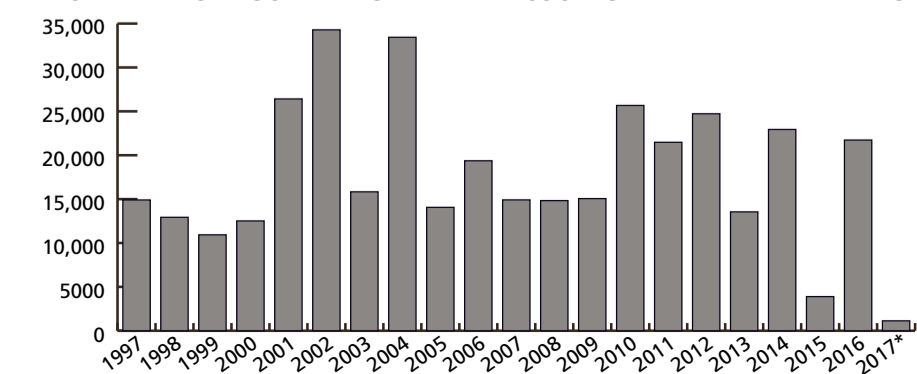
"They're smart animals," he said. "But if we got to the point where there was 100 of them there ... it would be hard to imagine. Almost like getting overrun by the huns."

Zach Urness has been an outdoors writer, photographer and videographer in Oregon for nine years. He is the author of the book "Hiking Southern Oregon" and can be reached at zurness@statesmanjournal.com or (503) 399-6801. Find him on Twitter at @ZachsORoutdoors.

WINTER STEELHEAD COUNTS AT WILLAMETTE FALLS



HATCHERY-RAISED SUMMER STEELHEAD COUNTS AT WILLAMETTE FALLS



*As of June 15, 2017; numbers incomplete, as fish passage will continue through June and July
Source: Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife