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

Sea lions push Willamette River steelhead to brink of extinction

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State wildlife officials say wild steelhead in the upper Willamette Basin could go extinct in coming years because of sea lions feasting on the iconic fish at Willamette Falls.

The Statesman Journal reported in June that wild steelhead numbers hit all-time lows this year due to poor ocean conditions, historic drought and the long-term effects of habitat loss.

But in an explosive report made public Aug. 7, officials say sea lion predation could tip the scales toward extinction in rivers including the Santiam, Molalla and Calapooia, all Willamette tributaries.

“We’ve reached the point where, unless we take some action, we may condemn this run to extinction,” said Dr. Shaun Clements, senior scientist and fish policy adviser for the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife. “We need to act now or extinction may be our legacy.”

The number of wild steelhead returning to the upper Willamette was the lowest on record this year with just 812 fish passing Willamette Falls.

In a normal year, about 5,600 wild steelhead are counted at the falls before spreading into tributaries in the Mid-Willamette Valley to spawn.

Wild winter steelhead are native to the upper Willamette, while summer steelhead are hatchery raised and more numerous in the river system.

Sea lions up, steelhead down

While this year’s low numbers can be attributed to poor ocean conditions and drought, sea lion numbers are growing so rapidly at Willamette Falls they’ll eventually decimate the run regardless of conditions, Clements said.

The number of sea lions jumped to more than 40 last year at the falls, where they can easily target fish returning from the ocean. In 2016, sea lions consumed at least a quarter of the entire run, the report says.

State scientists looked at the history of steelhead counts at Willamette Falls — which began in the 1970s — and projected the numbers forward with current levels of fish now lost to sea lions.

What they found, Clements said, was that regardless of ocean and drought conditions, the number of fish lost to predation would eventually whittle the run to such small numbers it would collapse to nothing.

“No matter what the conditions, with sea lions in the equation, numbers would keep dropping until the run was basically gone,” he said.

ODFW is in the process of applying for permits to remove or kill sea lions at Willamette Falls.

But because the animals are protected under the federal Marine Mammal Protection Act, it requires federal approval that may take years.

ODFW is seeking a way to take action in what they’re calling an “emergency situation.”

The report says sea lion populations are healthy and it’s only a small number that have expanded to freshwater systems where salmon and steelhead are easy to catch.

“Removal of a few problem individuals will have no impact on the overall sea lion population, but can significantly benefit ESA-listed fish,” said Robin Brown, lead scientist for ODFW’s marine mammal program.

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, but the number of sea lions at Bonneville remains in the hundreds.

Clements said removing sea lions now — or at least sooner — would stop the number of animals at Willamette Falls from growing.

But many environmental groups oppose the practice.

The Humane Society of the United States opposes culling sea lions and filed a lawsuit to prevent action at Bonneville Dam, although 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,” Sharon Young, marine issues field director for the Humane Society, said in June. “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,” she said. “It

might be satisfying, but it’s not going to change anything for the fish.”

Washington example

As an example of how sea lions could push steelhead to extinction, officials look at Ballard Locks in Seattle.

In the 1980s, sea lions hung out at the locks and feasted on steelhead returning to spawn in Lake Washington. According to reports, the run dropped from 2,600 fish in 1983 to just 70 fish by 1994.

Officials eventually got permission to remove sea lions, but the run never recovered, with just four fish counted in 2012.

“This has happened before,” Clements said. “We’re trying to avoid the fate of what happened in Washington.”

Clements is advocating for legislation that would revise the Marine Mammal Protection Act to allow the agency to address what he called an “emergency situation” without undermining the law.

In a news release, ODFW highlighted H.R. 2083, sponsored by Rep. Jaime Herrera Beutler (R-Wash.) and Rep. Kurt Schrader (D-Ore.), and S1702, sponsored by Sen. James Risch (R-Idaho), as the first steps toward that end.

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