

Are Willamette steelhead going extinct?

State biologists blame sea lions for drop in steelhead numbers

Zach Urness Salem Statesman Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

Winter steelhead began returning to the Upper Willamette River this month, but according to state biologists, about 1 in 4 of them won't make it past Willamette Falls.

That's because California sea lions have made the endangered fish their favorite meal.

Sea lions have been blamed by state biologists for consuming around 25 percent of the steelhead that return to the Upper Willamette, tipping the scales toward extinction in rivers including the Santiam, Molalla and Calapooya, all Willamette tributaries.

State officials have sought emergency permits to euthanize sea lions at Willamette Falls, but the process has been slow and won't take place until 2019 at the earliest.

Here are five things to know about where we stand in terms of sea lions and steelhead.

How bad are Upper Willamette winter steelhead runs?

Pretty bad, to the point that experts are increasingly worried the run could go extinct.

In a normal year — recent history — around 5,600 fish returned to the Upper Willamette. In the 1970s, the average return was close to 16,000 fish per year.

Last year, that number dropped to 822. This year, while it's still very early, numbers don't look much better.

The sudden decline is due to multiple factors — poor ocean conditions, recent drought and historical habitat loss due to dams.

But biologists have keyed on the sea lion issue because it's seen as the metaphorical straw that breaks the camel's back.

"We're not discounting all the other issues," said Bruce McIntosh, deputy fish chief of inland fisheries for the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife. "But it's this very large impact that pushes them into the extinction vortex."

Why are sea lions a problem?

The steelhead migrating upstream at Willamette Falls are all herded into one place and make an easy target for savvy sea lions looking for a meal.

Sea lions have been spotted in the Willamette and at Willamette Falls since the early 2000s. The steady growth in numbers started to raise alarm bells around 2011, McIntosh said.

By last year, the number of sea lions feasting on fish reached around 40, and officials expect similar or higher numbers this season.

What have officials done, short of killing them, to stop sea lions eating endangered fish?

State officials have used a variety of "hazing" techniques, that have included rubber bullets, chasing them off and "sea-lion bombs."

Last year, officials began trapping sea lions and moving them.

"The joke with the trap-and-relocate strategy was that they would end up beating the truck back to Willamette Falls," McIntosh said. "All of these solutions are temporary at best, and in reality, haven't been shown to have any real effect."

This year, officials aren't doing "any hazing of any substance," McIntosh said.



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

PHOTO COURTESY OF ODFW

Why can't state officials euthanize sea lions right now, the way they do at Cascade Locks?

At Cascade Locks on the Columbia River officials trapped and killed 54 sea lions in 2016.

But getting approval to take that type of action isn't easy.

Sea lions are protected under the federal Marine Mammal Protection Act. That means getting approval to euthanize typically takes years.

ODFW has completed the three-year step of documenting the impact and submitted their application to NOAA in October, but it takes a deep environmental review to get approval, and McIntosh said the earliest they'd get the permits is 2019.

This past summer, ODFW sought a special bypass due to the "emergency situation," but that requires action from Congress, which hasn't gone anywhere, McIntosh said.

Are sea lions really the blame here?

ODFW is using the sea lion issue "as a distraction from the real problems facing the fish," said Sharon Young, marine issues field director for Humane Society of America, last June.

Young said the so-called four H's — habitat destruction, hatcheries, harvest and hydropower — have all had a much greater impact on salmon and steelhead than sea lions.

"It's easy to point the finger at sea lions," Young said. "But if you kill them, and it doesn't actually do much to change the trajectory of the stock because everything else is so bad, then you've just killed them for no reason. And it's not clear in this case that just killing sea lions will fix the problem."

Travis Williams, executive director of Willamette Riverkeeper, made a similar point.

"While sea lions certainly have some impact at Willamette Falls, it is important that we don't lose sight of the things that have decimated populations of spring chinook and winter steelhead in the Willamette Basin over many decades: lack of fish passage at dams, destruction of habitat, and pollution," Williams said. "These major issues still need additional action today."

Zach Urness has been an outdoors writer, photographer and videographer in Oregon for 10 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.

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The project is proposing to construct a 16 inch water line within an existing 20 foot City of Silverton right-of-way (ROW) and measures 2,400 linear feet. The water line is located within the Township 6S, Range 1W, and Section 35CA of the Marion County Assessor's Maps. The line will run from Lane Street at S Third northeast to Rock Street.

The Pump Station project is located on the Silver Creek at the end of Wesley Street within Township 6S, Range 1W, and Section 35CC. This includes the replacement of two vertical intake pumps and a control panel at the existing intake facility.

Project information is available for review at:

City of Silverton
Public Works Department
306 S Water Street
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If you have any information regarding potential impacts environmental resources or historic properties associated with this proposed project, please provide it in writing to:

U.S. Department of Commerce
Economic Development Administration
Attn: Regional Environmental Officer
915 Second Avenue, Room 1890
Seattle, WA 98174-1012

Comments received in the EDA Seattle Regional Office by 5:00 p.m. Pacific Time on February 24, 2018, will be considered. A copy of NEPA/NHPA decisional document will be available upon request at the above EDA Regional Office.

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