

Washington farmers: Seals thwart salmon recovery

Pinnipeds, killer whales eat fish

By DON JENKINS
Capital Press

A Washington farm advocacy group wants harbor seals in the Salish Sea to get the same notoriety as the California sea lions eating salmon in the Lower Columbia River.

Harbor seals eat an estimated 23 million young salmon each year in the sea, a network of coastal waterways that include Puget Sound and Strait of Juan de Fuca. The take dwarfs the number of salmon eaten by sea lions near Bonneville Dam. The U.S. House on Tuesday passed over to the Senate a bill to revise the 1972 Marine Mammal Protection Act to let states and tribes euthanize more sea lions in the river.

Save Family Farming says the bill should extend to harbor seals in the Salish Sea. The seals are scuppering salmon recovery, which ratchets up pressure in northwest Washington to downsize agriculture to give fish more habitat and water, according to the group.

"Everyone is getting so pinched to give back habitat, and it's a little hard to understand how habitat is the only problem," said Skagit County farmer Zachary Barborinas. "I think this is one more large

factor that has to be considered."

A recent study led by National Ocean and Atmospheric Administration scientists estimated that harbor seals, California sea lions, Steller sea lions and killer whales ate 31.5 million chinook salmon in coastal waters between California and Alaska in 2015, a sixfold increase since 1975. Some 86 percent of those salmon were consumed by the Salish Sea's 77,800 harbor seals, up from 8,600 in 1975.

The consumption of salmon by the protected mammals "could be masking the success of coastwide salmon recovery," according to the study, posted online in November by Scientific Reports.

Save Family Farming director Gerald Baron said the group will wage a social media campaign to publicize how harbor seals are affecting salmon.

"They (the public) hear talk about habitat, in-stream flows and culverts," he said. "Farmers are not saying those things are not important, but we're saying that unless you address the foundational issue, they will be counterproductive."

Baron acknowledged the difficulty of targeting a cute mammal on social media. "That's going to be one of our greatest concerns," he said.

Killer whales eat the most salmon by weight, but harbor seals eat the most individual fish. Harbor seals ate 6.5

percent of the total coastwide smolt production, according to the study.

"There's no doubt there are a lot of salmon that get eaten by predators," the study's co-leader, NOAA research scientist Brandon Chasco, said Thursday.

Researchers didn't project how reducing the number of harbor seals would affect salmon survival. "What we don't know is, if the salmon had not been eaten by harbor seals whether they simply would have been consumed by another predator," Chasco said.

He said it was reasonable to bring up the study in discussing fishing, water and land policies, but the study itself doesn't make recommendations. "I certainly wasn't in it to change policy," Chasco said.

According to the NOAA study, the sea's killer whales, which number about 80, eat 190,000 to 260,000 adult chinook salmon annually. Gov. Jay Inslee signed an executive order in March appointing a task force to study how to increase the killer whale population.

The Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission estimates that California sea lions ate more than 8,900 salmon near Bonneville Dam in 2016. With NOAA approval, almost 200 sea lions have been euthanized in the river since 2008, the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife reports.



Mateusz Perkowski/Capital Press

A helicopter demonstrates aerial spraying at Western Helicopter Services in Newberg, Ore.

Workshop examines aerial spraying

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

NEWBERG, Ore. — Last year, Western Helicopter Services could only spray herbicides about a third of the time that was scheduled.

The rest of the time, they were waiting for the weather to improve and become suitable for spraying.

"We don't go out and spray willy-nilly," said Rick Krohn, president of Western Helicopter Services of Newberg, Ore.

Due to the speed and efficiency of spraying by air, though, the company was able to make the best use of the time windows that became available, Krohn said. "If we were trying to get that done by ground, (we'd) never get it done."

The realities of aerial herbicide spraying in forestry were discussed during a June 22 workshop organized by the Oregon Forest Resources Institute, an educational organization that examines controversial issues in timber management.

"You don't get much tougher than herbicides right now," Mike Cloughesy, OFRI's director of forestry, said of the issues facing the industry.

In recent years, two Oregon aerial applicators have faced regulatory penalties for spray violations, and one of them was sued over alleged

trespass damages by rural residents. Several bills have also been proposed in the Legislature to restrict aerial spraying, and voters in Lincoln County banned the practice under an ordinance that's now being challenged in court.

Speakers at the workshop explained why aerial spraying is a commonly used tool in the timber industry.

Aerial spraying plays a role in the "vegetation management" phase of forestry, preventing weeds from dominating young trees, said Jay Walters, field coordinator at the Oregon Department of Forestry.

Under the Oregon Forest Practices Act, timber clear cuts must be replanted within two years and trees must be "free to grow" unencumbered by vegetation or other serious problems within six years.

The chemicals must be mixed and loaded more than 100 feet from streams that bear fish or that are used for domestic water, and aerial applicators must spray at least 60 feet from waterways and standing water with a surface area larger than a quarter-acre, said Walters. Under a law passed in 2015, aerial applicators must also maintain a 60-foot buffer around inhabited dwellings and school campuses.

A year ago, digital subscriptions to the ODF's "Forest Activity Electronic Reporting and Notification

System," or FERNs, were made available to members of the public who wanted to learn about upcoming timber operations.

The number of subscriptions has grown to nearly 600, up from about 400 under the agency's earlier paper notification system, Walters said.

Even so, the Oregon Department of Agriculture and Oregon Department of Forestry haven't noticed an increase in complaints about herbicides since the digital subscriptions went live.

"People who had concerns were getting through to Forestry and us," said Mike Odenthal, ODA's lead pesticide investigator.

Notifications must usually be submitted to ODF at least 15 days before a spray operation but they remain valid for a year.

Because there have been examples of malfeasance among applicators, people should be notified of spray operations to make arrangements, such as keeping animals and children indoors, said Sen. Michael Dembrow, D-Portland. Dembrow, chairman of the Senate Environment and Natural Resources Committee, was among several elected officials at the workshop.

"I think there's a need for us to build on the FERNs system to be a more real-time notification system," Dembrow said.

Prescribed fire clears under story, fine fuels

By BRAD CARLSON
Capital Press

Fire crews continued this week to control the U.S. Forest Service's prescribed Lodgepole Fire, which spread slowly into adjacent unburned areas with help from recent warmer weather.

Higher temperatures quickly dried needle litter and heavier fuels, allowing the fire to spread and prompting local reports of smoke visible along the Middle Fork Payette River and into the town of Crouch north of Boise. The fire remains within its designated project area about 14 miles north of Crouch on National Forest System Road 671.

The immediate area offers limited opportunity for farming or grazing given its steep terrain, but the prescribed fire could benefit timber operators by burning out under-story vegetation and brush, helping larger trees, Boise National Forest spokesman Michael Williamson said.

Following a prescribed burn or mechanical thinning, the remaining trees are healthier because they have less



Boise National Forest

The Lodgepole prescribed fire north of Crouch, Idaho, spread this week as higher temperatures made more types of fuels available.

competition, more in-ground nutrients available and greater capacity to fight insects and disease, he said. Thinning also can raise the tree canopy, in effect keeping fire close to the ground and less likely to become large and catastrophic.

Crews have been putting in a fire line to reduce the blaze's spread, and putting out flames found in heavy fuels. The 1,250-acre prescribed fire was started in late April in the largely south-facing area partly to improve wildlife habitat.

Williamson on Monday said the previous weekend's approximately 60-person crew made significant progress and was expected to downsize to about 20 over the next couple of days.

He said closures of two short spur roads near the base of the fire, which starts at the

river and moves higher, are officially in effect until August but will be re-evaluated continuously. This will help crews monitor and control any rollout — loose material moving down from above after fire moves through.

The fire first burned vegetation as well as heavier dead and down fuels. Williamson said higher temperatures subsequently dried finer fuels and enabled the fire to creep into previously unburned areas, producing smoke as it found larger fuels such as small pockets of unburned timber or stumps.

Fire lines create fuel breaks to stop the fire from spreading, though it can continue to creep within containment boundaries, he said.

The Crouch area includes homes and recreation destinations.

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Economists: Trade threats weigh on dairy markets

By CAROL RYAN DUMAS
Capital Press

Slowing milk production and strong exports should be painting a positive picture for U.S. dairy, but talk of trade wars with Mexico and China seem to be weighing on dairy markets, according to economists at the University of Wisconsin.

U.S. milk production is staying below a 1 percent increase year over year, which is going to help tighten supply, Mark Stephenson, the university's director of dairy policy analysis, said in the latest Dairy Situation and Outlook podcast.

"... We're still carrying historically high inventories of product, but I don't think it's alarmingly large," he said.

Fellow economist Bob Cropp agreed: "There's plenty there but at least it's not a growing problem."

On the export side, the latest data show record shipments, with milk powders up 37 percent and cheese up 22 percent. April exports represented 18 percent of U.S. milk production.

"That's pretty significant," Cropp said.



University of Wisconsin

Bob Cropp, left, and Mark Stephenson

That's a big number, but there are concerns, Stephenson said.

"We've been rattling the saber pretty hard with trade, and we've gotten some blowback back into dairy," he said.

U.S. tariffs on steel and aluminum imports from Mexico drew threats of retaliatory tariffs on U.S. cheese of up to 25 percent. U.S. tariffs on a number of imports from China also resulted in threats of counter-tariffs on a slew of U.S. products, Cropp said.

The tariffs have not yet taken effect, but dairy futures have deteriorated in what he thinks is an overreaction to the announcements, he said.

Stephenson also thinks the markets have overreacted.

"But I didn't expect them not to react at all," he said.

USDA is still forecasting pretty robust export markets this year. But product prices have dropped since the first of June, and Class III milk futures are in the \$15s per hundredweight. In May, October futures were about \$17, Cropp said.

"So everything has really reacted downward," he said.

Absent any of the trade war discussions, most of the fundamentals would have supported the \$17 milk price, Stephenson said.

"We haven't actually had anything take place. We haven't had products that have been rebuffed or anything else from high tariffs. This is just in anticipation that it could happen," he said.

Domestic sales have been pretty good. Stocks aren't burdensome and will come down. Exports are record high, and milk production is only increasing slightly. World prices are holding, and U.S. products are competitive, Cropp said.

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OREGON TECHNICAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE MEETING (OTAC)

WHEN: July 11, 2018
@12:30pm-4:30pm

WHERE: Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife

4034 Fairview Industrial Dr. SE Salem, OR 97310

For more information, or to arrange special accommodations for meeting attendees, please contact Julie MacSwain at 503-414-3250 or julie.macswain@or.usda.gov.

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