

# Sea lions continue to eat endangered fish

Proposed bill supported by Northwest lawmakers

By **GEORGE PLAVERN**  
Capital Press

All the time, money and sacrifice to improve salmon and steelhead passage in the Willamette River won't mean a thing unless wildlife managers can get rid of sea lions feasting on the fish at Willamette Falls.

That was the message Tuesday from Shaun Clements, senior policy adviser for the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, who met at the falls with Liz Hamilton, executive director of the Northwest Sportfishing Industry Association, and Suzanne Kunse, district director for U.S. Rep. Kurt Schrader, D-Ore.

The group watched as several sea lions patrolled the waterfalls and nearby fish ladders. Clements said there could be as many as 50 to 60 sea lions in the area on any given day in April or early May, and the animals are responsible for eating roughly 20 percent of this year's already paltry winter steelhead run.

As of May 22, ODFW has counted just 2,086 winter steelhead at Willamette Falls. That's less than half of the 10-year average and 22 percent of the 50-year average.

ODFW applied in October 2017 to kill sea lions from Willamette Falls under the Marine Mammal Protection Act, though Clements said he does not expect a decision from the National Marine Fisheries Service until the end of the year.

The department also tried relocating 10 California sea lions to a beach south of Newport earlier this year, only to see the animals return in just six days.

Meanwhile, the U.S. Army



George Plaven/Capital Press

Sea lions continue to prey on salmon and steelhead at Willamette Falls in Oregon.



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**Shaun Clements**  
Senior policy adviser  
for the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife

Corps of Engineers is proposing to build a water temperature control tower and floating fish screen at Detroit Dam farther up the Willamette Basin to aid salmon and steelhead survival, a project that could cost up to \$250 million and leave farmers without water in the reservoir for up to two years.

But Clements said it would be a wasted investment if not

enough fish can even make it past the falls.

“Certainly for winter steelhead, if we don’t deal with (sea lions), whatever we do in the upper basin isn’t going to help,” Clements said. “If you’re managing other sectors, you have to manage sea lions as well.”

Schrader is co-sponsoring legislation to provide greater

flexibility for managing sea lions in the future. The Endangered Salmon and Fisheries Predation Prevention Act would extend the authority for killing sea lions that prey on endangered salmon and steelhead to states and tribes.

The bill has support from a bipartisan group of Northwest lawmakers, including Reps. Jaime Herrera Beutler and Dan

Newhouse of Washington, and Rep. Don Young of Alaska, all Republicans.

Clements said the Marine Mammal Protection Act — which was signed into law by President Richard Nixon in 1972 — is too restrictive the way it is currently written, and forces wildlife managers to wait too long before they can apply for a lethal take permit to protect fish.

“By that point, you’re already having a really bad impact,” he said. “We want to stop the habituation here.”

Hamilton, with the Northwest Sportfishing Industry Association, said she remembers fishing on the Willamette

River and it would be a shock to see a single sea lion.

The problem, Hamilton said, has really sprung over the last 10 years. It is especially problematic in places like Willamette Falls, where fish are essentially bottled up trying to maneuver upstream to spawn.

“Think about what the basin has done for these steelhead,” Hamilton said. “After 10 years of pretty heavy pounding from the sea lions, it’s all gone down the barrel.”

If ODFW can have the tools to deal with sea lions more proactively, and not when steelhead runs are at the brink of extinction, she said they will have been successful.

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