

Tribes supporting legislation to address sea lion predation

By Dean Rhodes
Smoke Signals editor

Two Oregon Tribes – the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde and the Siletz Tribe – are supporting the Predation Reduction of Salmon Act introduced in the U.S. Senate on Tuesday, July 31, by Oregon Sens. Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley.

The act would address the “urgent” issue of sea lion predation of endangered salmon on the Columbia River and at Willamette Falls, while promoting Tribal management of natural resources and ensuring the humane removal of the animals.

“Earlier this summer I stood, helplessly, at Willamette Falls and watched sea lions take salmon and steelhead away from our ceremonial fishermen, our community and our families,” said Tribal Council Chairwoman Cheryle A. Kennedy in a Facebook post placed on the Tribe’s official social media page on Friday, Aug. 3. “We cannot allow this to happen. We cannot allow the extinction that occurred at Ballard Locks to happen here.”

Kennedy said Merkley and Wyden’s legislation would allow the region to come together to address the issue.

“Merkley’s bill recognizes that Oregon Tribes, such as Siletz, continue to have a unique interest in salmon recovery and should not be sidelined by Congress in sea lion management,” said Dee Pigsley, Tribal chair of the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians. “Tribes can play both a scientific and cultural role in restoring balance in the river for our salmon.”

A press release from Merkley’s office stated that sea lions are currently having a “devastating” effect on salmon recovery, eating up to 25 percent of certain salmon runs.

At Willamette Falls, for example, the Oregon Department of Fish & Wildlife estimates that unless sea lion predation is addressed that the winter steelhead run in the Willamette River will likely face extinction.

“Current efforts to manage sea lion predation, including hazing and non-lethal deterrence, have not

been effective,” the press release stated. “When the Oregon Department of Fish & Wildlife captured two sea lions at Willamette Falls and transported them 230 miles away to Newport, the sea lions returned to the falls in less than a week. Despite the best efforts of state wildlife managers, federal legislation is needed to address the growing problem of sea lion predation.”

“Salmon are critical to Oregon’s culture and heritage, and it’s clear that sea lions are creating a serious threat to endangered salmon that needs to be solved,” Merkley said. “It’s possible to address this problem in a targeted way that enables equitable Tribal management and does not impact sea lion populations, and that is what we should strive for.”

“Sea lions are taking a bite out of Oregon’s salmon and steelhead stocks, and it’s clear a response is needed to reverse the rapidly reduced supply of these endangered fish in Oregon’s rivers and waterways,” Wyden said. “The legislation will help solve the challenge of this dwindling supply of salmon and steelhead, protecting good-paying recreational jobs and Oregon’s coastal and fishing communities.”

The act would target critical endangered salmon habitat and give wildlife managers more flexibility to remove sea lions from areas where salmon are most at risk, including Bonneville Dam, Willamette Falls and other emerging areas. It also would ensure humane treatment of sea lions, which are currently protected by Marine Mammal Protection Act passed in 1972.

The act also would allow Oregon, Idaho and Washington to enter into agreements with Tribes that have legal or historic interests in the protection of salmon to help manage sea lion predation.

Merkley discussed sea lion predation of salmon during his May 4 visit with the Grand Ronde Tribal Council. He said any legislation has to be targeted and not create an outcry, especially from the influential Humane Society of the United States. ■

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