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May 15, 2018

The Honorable James Risch
United States Senate
483 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510-1204

Dear Senator Risch:

California and Steller sea lions are killing as many as 43 percent of the spring-migrating Chinook salmon in the Columbia River, including threatened and endangered species that spawn in north-central Washington and central Idaho. Predation by sea lions also is driving wild winter steelhead in the Willamette River of Oregon to near extinction. We are concerned that if this predation is not better controlled, some of these unique species could be lost in the coming years. What is needed is a more streamlined and effective process for removing the most problematic sea lions, those that travel from their normal habitat near the Pacific Ocean more than 100 miles up the Columbia and into tributaries to prey on salmon and steelhead. Accordingly, the Northwest Power and Conservation Council strongly supports updating the Marine Mammal Protection Act.

The Council supports S. 1702, legislation you introduced, that would speed the process of removing the most problematic sea lions that prey on salmon and steelhead in the Columbia River. Recognizing the seriousness of this problem, the governors of Washington, Oregon, and Idaho have expressed their support for legislation that both parties could support in the House and Senate. State fishery managers from Oregon, Washington, Idaho, and the Treaty Tribes have proposed amendments to S. 1702 that we support including in the final legislation.

In 2017 fish and wildlife costs of the Bonneville Power Administration totaled \$450 million, of which \$254 million was for the Council's fish and wildlife program. The Program includes measures to protect and enhance fish and wildlife of the Columbia River Basin. That funding comes from electricity ratepayers, whose investment is increasingly threatened by sea lion predation on the very fish runs they are paying to conserve and rebuild. Additionally, Columbia River dams have been re-configured and operations altered to provide safer passage for salmon, and harvest opportunity has been greatly curtailed for tribal and non-tribal fishers. While there is a significant monetary and social cost to the region, the people of the Northwest support recovery of these iconic fish species.

The West Coast California sea lion population has grown to a current level of about 300,000 animals, which NOAA Fisheries believes is at or near carrying capacity. As well, the population of Eastern Steller sea lions has grown to about 75,000 animals.

The number of sea lions counted in Astoria, Oregon, which is a favorite resting and feeding spot for these marine mammals, has grown steadily in recent years to an all-time high of 3,834 in 2016. A portion of these sea lions (usually several hundred) follow the spring salmon run 140 miles upstream and target them as prey near Bonneville Dam and in tributaries. There are 32 populations of ESA-threatened and endangered spring Chinook salmon being significantly harmed by the increasing sea lion predation. NOAA Fisheries research has identified an “unexplained mortality” of Columbia River spring Chinook salmon between Astoria and Bonneville Dam as high as 43 percent of the run. The average mortality rate in the eight years of study is 23 percent, and the average annual salmon missing between Astoria and Bonneville Dam is nearly 50,000 fish, which the chief researcher, Dr. Michelle Wargo-Rub, said can be attributed to sea lions.

Meanwhile, the problem is intensifying as sea lions are spreading to Columbia tributaries including the Willamette. The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife has concluded that at least one population of wild, upper Willamette winter steelhead, an ESA-listed threatened species, will go extinct if nothing is done about predation by sea lions at Willamette Falls.

The levels of sea lion predation are not trivial, and we have ample evidence of what happens when science is ignored. Sea lions invaded the Ballard Locks in Seattle in the mid-1980s and killed so many steelhead migrating to Lake Washington that the run of fish became functionally extinct. At the time, the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife used various methods of non-lethal hazing of these sea lions, to no effect.

Confirming this, in a recent letter to NOAA Fisheries regarding predation at Bonneville and citing “the collective knowledge of marine mammal specialists,” the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers wrote: *All indications and studies to date at Bonneville Dam indicate that non-lethal hazing is not effective and fails to satisfy the requirements of RPA 49.* ... Chris Oliver, NOAA’s assistant administrator for fisheries in the National Marine Fisheries Service, testified to a Senate subcommittee recently, “NOAA shares concerns about the impact robust populations of pinnipeds throughout the West Coast are having on ESA-listed salmon and steelhead stocks.” He said NOAA “welcomes the opportunity to work with Congress to improve the process.”

All other sources of mortality are being reduced while predation by sea lions increases. It is time to update the Marine Mammal Protection Act to speed the process of removing the most problematic sea lions and reduce the increasing threats to salmon and steelhead populations in the Columbia River. Thank you for introducing S. 1702, and we are looking forward to working with you through the legislative process.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "James A. Hat". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Chair

Identical letter sent to all Northwest Senators