



Association of Northwest Steelheaders

6641 SE Lake Rd. • Milwaukie OR 97222

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Established 1960

August 19, 2017

Senator Ron Wyden
Senator Jeff Merkley
Representative Earl Blumenauer
Representative Suzanne Bonamici
Representative Peter DeFazio
Representative Kurt Schrader
Representative Greg Walden

Dear Senators Merkley and Wyden and Representatives Blumenauer, Bonamici, Defazio, Schrader and Walden:

Oregon's upper Willamette River wild winter steelhead are in serious trouble. And they desperately need your immediate help.

Upper Willamette River wild steelhead were listed as threatened with extinction under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) in 1999 primarily due to impacts associated with dams and lost and degraded habitat. Following some initial progress and an average run of 5,600 fish, their numbers have seen an alarming decline over the last decade. In 2017, only 512 fish returned to spawn, the lowest number on record.

Since listing, state, federal, local and private groups have spent an immense amount of time and money on recovery efforts, including numerous projects to restore degraded habitats. There is no directed fishing harvest, and indirect fishing impacts are minor. Hatchery practices have been reformed (indeed all releases of hatchery winter steelhead in the upper Willamette River were discontinued) and are continuing to be refined to support recovery goals. And while there remains substantial work to do, such as providing access to historical spawning areas now blocked by dams and continued restoration and recovery of degraded habitats, there is an immediate and escalating threat that may overwhelm all prior and ongoing recovery efforts.

This threat is expanding predation by California sea lions in the mainstem Columbia and Willamette Rivers, and especially just below Willamette Falls, where these fish congregate before ascending the falls.

While there are many factors contributing to the precipitous decline of upper Willamette River steelhead—and certainly poor marine and freshwater conditions played a major role in 2017's dismal return—the immediate impact of increasing sea lion predation may be the nail in the coffin for these fish.

Anglers dedicated to enhancing and protecting fisheries and their habitats for today and the future.



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This is not just exaggerated talk of disgruntled anglers. Scientists at the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) recently reported that sea lions consumed “at least one quarter of the wild steelhead run” in 2017 and concluded in their population viability assessment that if current sea lion predation levels continue, there is a high risk of extinction and “up to a 90 percent probability that at least one wild steelhead population [in the upper Willamette] will go extinct as a direct result of predation.”¹ In contrast, the assessment found a low risk of extinction in the absence of sea lions, which led ODFW to conclude that the risk of extinction could be significantly reduced or avoided by limiting sea lions’ access to the area around Willamette Falls.

ODFW’s conclusions echo and expand on what scientists at the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) already recognized. In its 2016 biological status review, NMFS reported that “sea lion numbers over the past five years at Willamette Falls . . . have been steadily increasing and their predation on listed salmonid stocks has reached significant levels.”² The federal agency further recognized that sea lion predation has increased at an “unprecedented rate” and that current management efforts are “insufficient to reduce the severity of the threat [to ESA-listed salmon and steelhead populations], especially . . . at Willamette Falls.”³ Accordingly, NMFS scientists recommended that managers “seek avenues to reduce pinniped predation in the mainstem Willamette and Columbia rivers.”⁴

Since the enactment of the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA), the coast-wide population of California sea lions has grown exponentially, and stands today at an extremely healthy level of approximately 300,000 animals. As their numbers increased, sea lions began showing up more and more at places where salmon and steelhead collect on their upstream spawning migrations—“choke-points” where fish are vulnerable such as the Ballard Locks in Seattle, Bonneville Dam on the Columbia River, and at Willamette Falls. In the 1990s at the Ballard Locks, sea lions (including the infamous “Hershel”) decimated the Lake Washington/Cedar River wild winter

¹ ODFW, Press Release August 7, 2017, “Willamette steelhead on verge of extinction due to increasing sea lion presence at Willamette Falls”, avail. at http://www.dfw.state.or.us/news/2017/08_Aug/80717.asp; see ODFW, July 31, 2017, *Steelhead Populations in Crisis at Willamette Falls*; ODFW, Dr. Matthew Falcy, July 7, 2017, Population Viability of Willamette River Winter Steelhead: An Assessment of the Effect of Sea Lions at Willamette Falls.

² National Marine Fisheries Service, 2016 5-Year Review: Summary & Evaluation of Upper Willamette River Steelhead & Upper Willamette River Chinook, at 24-25.

³ *Id.*

⁴ *Id.* at 47.



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steelhead run which has never recovered. More recently, NMFS has indicated that sea lions at Bonneville Dam are having significant adverse impacts on the recovery of upper-Columbia River wild steelhead and spring Chinook stocks.

California sea lions are a natural and essential part of our coastal ecosystem and the Association of Northwest Steelheaders supports maintaining a healthy and sustainable population. Conservation of sea lions must be balanced, however, with the imperative to recover, and indeed prevent the extinction of, our threatened and endangered salmon and steelhead populations. To accomplish this, federal and state agencies need the tools to effectively manage the impacts sea lions are having.

Commercial hunting in the 1800s and early 1900s severely depleted the California sea lion population. Due to protections, California sea lions have fully recovered and are now at their maximum carrying capacity. A relatively small number of sea lions, however, are having a disproportionate adverse impact on imperiled salmon and steelhead runs by preying on those runs on spawning migration routes and in spawning tributaries, and human intervention is necessary to address this man-made problem before upper-Willamette wild steelhead and other runs are gone for good.

While the MMPA includes some limited provisions to address these impacts, bureaucratic delays and legal roadblocks (i.e., lawsuits) have often rendered state and federal efforts “too little, too late.” Simply put, the MMPA does not currently provide fishery managers sufficient tools to proactively address escalating situations in a timely manner, such as now occurring at Willamette Falls.

Representatives Kurt Schrader (Ore.) and Jamie Herrera Beutler (Wash.) (H.R. 2083), and Senator James Risch (Idaho) (S 1702), have sponsored legislation that provide a starting point to address the deficiencies in the MMPA.

We urge you to heed the recommendations of scientists at both ODFW and NMFS and to work with your colleagues above and federal and state fish and wildlife managers to amend the MMPA to provide managers with effective and timely means to reduce sea lion predation on vulnerable salmon and steelhead populations. We ask you to take action now, before upper Willamette wild steelhead face the same fate as the functionally extinct run of wild steelhead to the Lake Washington/Cedar River basin.

Best regards,

Tom VanderPlaat, President

Bob Rees, Executive Director

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