



## FLY FISHING

## VIDEO SHOWCASE

ADVERTISE 

SUBSCRIPTIONS ▼

A bipartisan group of Washington legislators has filed a bill in Olympia asking Congress and the Trump Administration to modify the Marine Mammal Protection Act to allow lethal removals of sea lions and harbor seals and other actions in more of the state to save ESA-listed Chinook and other salmon populations.



A HARBOR SEAL SWIMS IN THE COLUMBIA RIVER. (ODFW)

[House Joint Memorial 4004](#) requests that the federal government “allow greater flexibility for states and tribes to use adaptive management tools, including the use of lethal removal, for pinniped predators of endangered salmon stocks across all marine shorelines and the Puget Sound.”

Introduced Monday, the bill has 17 cosponsors – 12 Republicans and five Democrats – including the chair of the House committee the legislation has been assigned to, Representative Kristine Reeves (D-Federal Way). No hearing date has been set as of this afternoon.

The bill notes that in 2018, Congress amended MMPA via the Endangered Salmon Predation Prevention Act, which President Trump signed into law. It expanded the potential area of lethal removals in the Columbia and allowed the culling of Steller sea lions in addition to California sea lions, but the impact of robust but strictly protected pinniped populations on the coveted fish goes well beyond the big river.

HJM 4004 states that the Washington State Academy of Sciences reported “current populations of pinnipeds are a contributing factor in the decline and depression of salmon

populations in Washington state waters" and "recommended that strategic and appropriately scaled adaptive management of pinniped populations, including lethal removals, is a key tool that could be expanded to improve salmon recovery."

A study published last year about one Puget Sound fish stock supports that. It reported that harbor seals ate as many as 33 percent of wild steelhead smolts migrating out of the Nisqually River and found that "recovering populations of predators can derail salmon and steelhead recovery, especially when fish populations are small and struggling," [according to a National Marine Fisheries Service writeup](#) of research results.

[Nisqually spawning surveys](#) show steelhead numbers in the 600-plus-fish range in the two most recent years data is available for, down from a bump to around 2,000 in the mid-2010s following an extended period of low returns.

"If we can identify areas with outsized predator impacts on salmon such as river deltas, managers can use that information to focus management actions where they can make the most difference," [stated](#) Megan Moore, a research scientist at NMFS's Northwest Fisheries Science Center and lead author of the paper.

It's that kind of science that will help make the case to do something about the potentially additive predation that not only impacts costly efforts to recover Endangered Species Act-listed populations such as Puget Sound steelhead and Chinook, but affects fisheries, including treaty-reserved ones.

HJM 4004 points out that state and tribal managers can't use the Academy of Sciences' recommendations without Congressional action.

As a result of 2018's MMPA tweak by federal lawmakers, in 2020, the three Northwest states and four tribes were granted a five-year permit (good through August 14, 2025) to remove up to 176 Stellers and 540 Californias in the Columbia from I-205 upstream to McNary Dam and in all tributaries of the big river where ESA-listed salmon and steelhead spawn. Prior to that, removals were limited to Bonneville Dam and Willamette Falls.

According to the states' and tribes' [2024 annual report](#) to NMFS, 95 Stellers and 90 Californias have been removed under that permit. All of those have been at the dam and falls, however, as the capacity to expand beyond those spots is limited by the number of haul-out traps on hand, the size of the devices needed for the larger Stellers, and a lack of money to build them where sea lions are known to gather. A \$1.5 million proviso to fund expanding capacity on the Columbia was [cut out of Washington's budget](#) late in 2024's negotiations.

Targeting specific predatory pinnipeds at pinchpoints has been proven effective. At Willamette Falls in the mid- to late 2010s, at least one of the Willamette River's wild winter-run steelhead runs faced an 89 percent risk of extinction before 33 Californias were removed by ODFW in 2018 and 2019 under a separate state permit. Returns have [spiked in recent years](#) as ocean conditions have also improved for steelhead.

In Puget Sound, scientists have also been testing Targeted Acoustic Startle Technology, or TAST, devices at the [Ballard Locks](#), Hood Canal Bridge, Capitol Lake and [Whatcom Creek](#), where high-salmon-consuming "rogue" seals have been identified. In an email after this blog was initially published, Kylie DaCunha of GenusWave, which supplied TAST devices for the projects, said that while some feel the results have been mixed, "significant reductions in seal presence" have been observed at sites, outside of one year at the locks due to various malfunctions and other things going on there.

HJM 4004 isn't the only bill to watch in Olympia.

[HB 1685](#) would put WDFW under the governor's thumb as a cabinet agency and turn the Fish and Wildlife Commission into an advisory body only. Sportsmen oppose it and would prefer to focus on fixing the commission's recent dysfunction.

[SB 5583](#) would dramatically increase the cost of fishing and hunting licenses by 38 percent, though senior hunters would be spared the hike.

Neither bill have been scheduled for a committee hearing.

[HB 1325](#) would make certain big game hunting and other fish and wildlife violations natural resource infractions (finable up to \$500) instead of criminal offenses that have to be dragged through overburdened county court systems. Doing so with low-level fishing and small game violations via a 2020 law change boosted court resolutions from 16 percent to better than 80 percent, according to former WDFW legislative director Tom McBride.

[HB 1442](#) would require WDFW to manage gray wolves in federally delisted Eastern Washington counties with certain pack numbers as if they were removed from state ESA listings, as well as form a workgroup to come up a management plan within six months. It has a companion bill in the Senate, [SB 5354](#).

[HB 1311](#) would override the Fish and Wildlife Commission's decision to keep wolves listed as state endangered and require WDFW to manage them as a sensitive species, as the agency's periodic status review last year recommended. It has a hearing Wednesday morning.



[SSB 5155](#) would make permanent a pilot habitat program streamlining the “environmental permitting process for salmon recovery projects,” according to a nonpartisan legislative writeup. It has passed out of its initial committee and is in Ways & Means, and it too has a companion bill in the House, [HB 1208](#).

There are also a host of firearm bills that my colleague Dave Workman has been reporting on for [The Gun Mag](#).

*Editor's note: If the ol', lazy Olympia Outsider™ has missed any fish- and wildlife-related bills, drop him a line at [awalgamott@media-inc.com](mailto:awalgamott@media-inc.com).*