HOUSE COMMITTEE ON
NATURAL RESOURCES
CHAIRMAN BRUCE WESTERMAN

To:	Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife and Fisheries Republican Members
From:	Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife and Fisheries Staff: Richie O'Connell (richie@mail.house.gov), Kirby Struhar (kirby.struhar@mail.house.gov), and Jackson Renfro (jackson.renfro@mail.house.gov); x5-8331
Date:	Tuesday, December 2, 2025
Subject:	Oversight Hearing titled *"Sea Lion Predation in the Pacific Northwest"*

The Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife and Fisheries will hold an oversight hearing titled *"Sea Lion Predation in the Pacific Northwest"* on **Wednesday, December 3, 2025, at 10:00 a.m. in room 1324 Longworth House Office Building**.

Member offices are requested to notify Hannah Garrett (hannah.garrett@mail.house.gov) by 4:30 p.m. on Tuesday, December 2, 2025, if their Member intends to participate in the hearing.

I. KEY MESSAGES

- In recent decades, Tribes, federal agencies, state fish and wildlife managers, and other stakeholders across the Pacific Northwest have dedicated significant resources to developing recovery strategies for anadromous species listed under the Endangered Species Act (ESA).
- Dramatic increases in pinniped populations, which prey on salmon and steelhead, undermine recovery efforts and impact the entire region, especially Tribes that rely on salmon species for cultural and subsistence practices.
- The Secretary of Commerce was authorized in 2018 to issue permits to certain Tribes and the states of Washington, Oregon, and Idaho to lethally take sea lions within the Columbia River and its tributaries.
- This hearing presents an opportunity to examine the challenge facing the Pacific Northwest, the effectiveness of legislative efforts to address the issue of Sea Lion predation in the Columbia River Basin, and potential additional solutions that could be implemented across the region.

II. WITNESSES

Panel I (Administration Witnesses)

- **Mr. Sam Rauch,** Deputy Assistant Administrator, National Marine Fisheries Service, Silver Spring, MD

Panel II (Outside Experts)

- **The Honorable Ken Choke,** Chairman, Nisqually Indian Tribe, Olympia, WA
- **Ms. Aja DeCoteau,** Executive Director, Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission, Portland, OR
- **Mr. Ed Johnstone,** Chairman, Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission, Olympia, WA
- **Mr. Larry Phillips,** Pacific Fisheries Policy Director, American Sportfishing Association, Olympia, WA *(Minority Witness)*

III. BACKGROUND

In recent decades, pinniped populations—which include harbor seals, California sea lions, and Steller sea lions—have exploded across the Pacific Northwest.[1] Pinnipeds prey on threatened and endangered salmon and steelhead as they migrate to and from the ocean, threatening their recovery, jeopardizing billions in taxpayer and ratepayer investments, and adversely impacting Tribal treaty, cultural, and subsistence practices. The Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) generally prohibits the "take" of marine mammals and provides minimal flexibility to manage pinniped populations to benefit species listed under the ESA.[2]

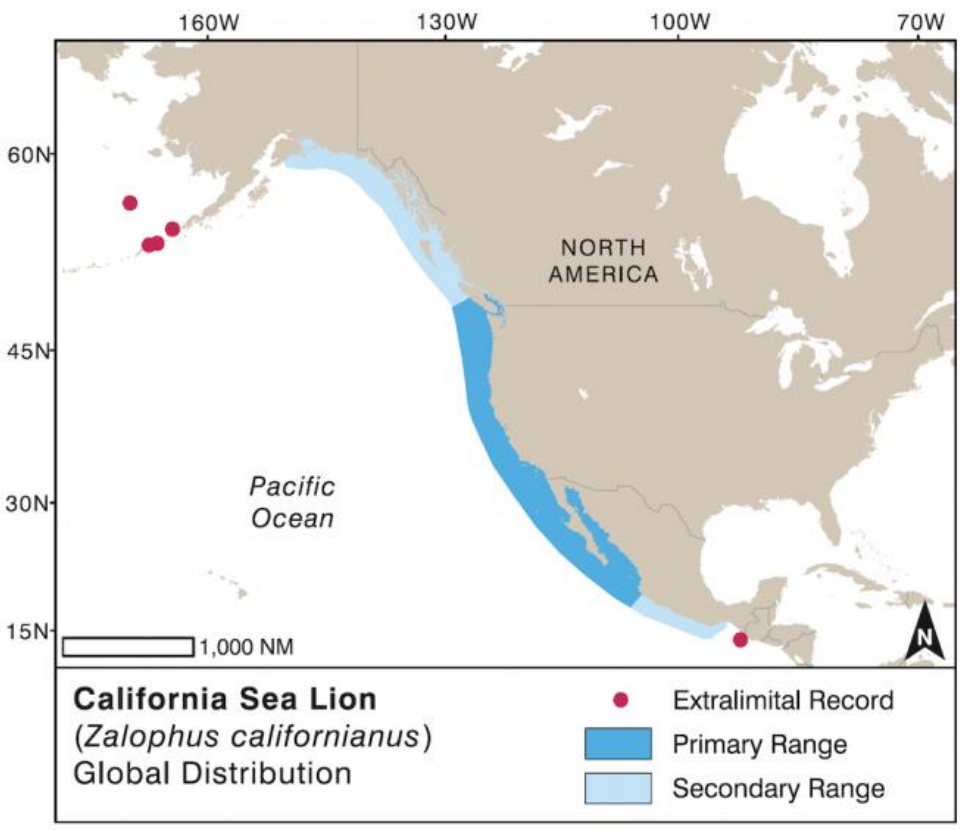

Figure 1: Range of California sea lions along the west coast. | Source: Jefferson, et al., 2015

[1] *Pinniped Predation on Salmonids in the Washington Portions of the Salish Sea and Outer Coast*, Washington State Academy of Sciences, https://wdfw.wa.gov/sites/default/files/publications/02579/wdfw02579.pdf.
[2] "Marine Mammal Protection," NOAA Fisheries, 2018, www.fisheries.noaa.gov/topic/marine-mammal-protection.

Impacts on the Columbia River

Figure 2: Sea lion consumes salmon near Bonneville Dam | Source: The Seattle Times

In the 1990s, sea lions were observed in small numbers at Bonneville Dam, 146 miles up the Columbia River.[3] By 2002, 30 California sea lions predated at Bonneville Dam, with growing numbers witnessed in subsequent years.[4] Since 2003, sea lions have annually eaten up to 5.8 percent of the upriver spring run of fish.[5] This is occurring within a quarter-mile of Bonneville Dam.[6] Sea lions, sometimes in great numbers, are also observed at Willamette Falls, the Sandy, Lewis, Kalama, and Cowlitz rivers (tributaries downstream of Bonneville Dam). Sea lions become habituated to these pinch points for salmon and return year after year to the same locations. California and Steller sea lions reside far upstream in the Columbia River from August through June annually. This exposes almost all upriver salmon stocks to intense predation at these pinch points.[7] In June 2013, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) published an ESA Recovery Plan for various Lower Columbia River species of salmon and steelhead, finding that "pinniped predation on adult spring Chinook salmon and winter steelhead in the Columbia River estuary continues to increase."[8] The Recovery Plan cited the need for more reliable data on salmon mortality caused by pinniped predation.[9] Notably, from 2002 to 2017, salmonid passage at Bonneville Dam decreased from 284,732 to 109,040, while the number of salmonids consumed by California sea lions and Steller sea lions at the dam grew from 1,010 to 5,384,[10] an increase of roughly 433 percent.

Growing pinniped populations affect many Tribes across the region that rely on salmon species for cultural and subsistence purposes. In 2015, Leotis McCormack of the Nez Perce Tribe, and then-Commissioner of the Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission (CRITFC), testified before the House Committee on Natural Resources that the growth in species like the California sea lion was endangering Tribes' reserved treaty rights as well as damaging ceremonial and

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[3] Casey Clark, et al., *Final Field Report: 2017-2021 Pinniped Research and Management Activities at Bonneville Dam*, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, November 1, 2021, https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/s3/2024-02/mmpa-section-120-authorization-bonneville-dam-final-report-11-1-2021.pdf.
[4] *Id.*
[5] John Harrison, "Sea Lion Fish Feast," Northwest Power and Conservation Council, March 1 2017, https://www.nwcouncil.org/news/2017/03/01/sea-lion-fish-feast/.
[6] *Id.*
[7] "Sea Lion Management," Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, accessed November 26, 2025, 2025, www.dfw.state.or.us/fish/sealion/.
[8] *ESA Recovery Plan for Lower Columbia River Coho Salmon, Lower Columbia River Chinook Salmon, Columbia River Chum Salmon, and Lower Columbia River Steelhead*, National Marine Fisheries Service, Northwest Region, 2013, https://repository.library.noaa.gov/view/noaa/16002.
[9] *Id.*
[10] "Sea Lion Predation on Columbia River Salmon and Steelhead," Congressional Research Service, December 12, 2018, www.congress.gov/crs-product/IF11045?q=%7B%22search%22%3A%22pinniped+populations%22%7D&s=1&r=3#.

subsistence practices due to increased levels of salmon predation.[11] CRITFC is an organization that works with four Tribes in the Columbia River to conduct "invaluable biological research, fisheries management, hydrology, and other science to support the protection and restoration of Columbia River Basin salmon, lamprey, and sturgeon."[12] The four Tribes are the Nez Perce Tribes, the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, the Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs Reservation of Oregon, and the Confederated Tribes and Bands of the Yakama Nation.[13] At the 2015 hearing, McCormack noted that there are thirteen different salmon and steelhead populations within the Columbia River, and that while California sea lions "are at historically robust population levels,"[14] they are "exacting a toll on the recovery of ESA listed species and other natural stocks in the Columbia Basin."[15]

Figure 3: Pinniped consumes salmon downstream of Bonneville Dam | Source: Northwest Power and Conservation Council

Additionally, the Bonneville Power Administration (BPA), which operates power infrastructure projects along the Columbia River and the broader Pacific Northwest, has dedicated significant resources to these efforts. In Fiscal Year 2024, BPA ratepayers spent approximately $475.8 million on projects related to fish passage, habitat restoration, and other research and monitoring efforts, [16] adding to the hundreds of millions of dollars already contributed by federal taxpayers.[17]

Under Section 120 of the MMPA, states may apply to the Secretary of Commerce for intentional lethal taking of "individually identifiable" pinnipeds that have a "significant negative impact" on ESA-listed salmonid stocks.[18] However, this process proved unwieldy. In 2018, Congress enacted the Endangered Salmon Predation Prevention Act[19] to provide more appropriate management tools for pinniped populations. The law amended Section 120 of the MMPA to authorize the lethal intentional take of non-depleted pinniped stocks in a defined geographic range along the Columbia River and certain tributaries by the states of Washington, Oregon, and Idaho, as well as by CRITFC and its four sovereign tribes. As of May 2025, using this authority, the eligible entities have removed a total of 229 sea lions.[20] In August 2025, the Trump administration extended the relevant permit for another five

[11] Testimony of The Honorable Leotis McCormack Nez Perce Tribe and Commissioner, Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission, July 23, 2015, https://naturalresources.house.gov/uploadedfiles/moccormacktestimony.pdf.
[12] "About Us," CRITFC, November 3, 2021, https://critfc.org/about-us/.
[13] "Member Tribes Overview," CRITFC, https://critfc.org/member-tribes-overview/.
[14] *Id.*
[15] Testimony of The Honorable Leotis McCormack Nez Perce Tribe and Commissioner, Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission, July 23, 2015, https://naturalresources.house.gov/uploadedfiles/moccormacktestimony.pdf.
[16] *2024 Report on Bonneville Power Administration's Fish and Wildlife Expenditures*, Northwest Power and Conservation Council, October 2, 2025, https://www.nwcouncil.org/fs/19438/2025-4.pdf.
[17] *Columbia River Salmon Budget Crosscut*, The Office of Management and Budget, July 2024, https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/OMB-Columbia-River-Salmon-Budget-Crosscut-July-2024.pdf.
[18] 16 U.S.C. 1389(f).
[19] Public Law 115–329.
[20] Robert Anderson, *Marine Mammal Protection Act §120(F)−Temporary Marine Mammal Removal Authority on the Waters of the Columbia River and Its Tributaries MMPA §120(F) Pinniped−Fishery Interaction Task Force Meeting*, NOAA Fisheries, May 28, 2025, https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/s3/2025-08/Robert-Anderson-MMPA-Section-120-f-Task-Force-Meeting-May-2025.pdf.

years, allowing state and Tribal wildlife managers to lethally take the remaining 424 California sea lions and 62 Steller sea lions authorized under the original permit.[21]

Puget Sound and Salish Sea

Although Congress provided management flexibility in the Columbia River Basin, the problem of pinniped predation on ESA-listed species remains largely unmitigated throughout the rest of the region. A recent study from the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, Tribes, and other researchers found that between December 2020 and August 2021, Steller sea lions consumed "more than 2 million young Chinook salmon along Washington's northwest coastline."[22] The study noted that while Chinook salmon populations have declined "precipitously,"[23] Steller sea lion abundance "increased at a rate of nearly 8 percent per year from 2010 to 2017."[24] Ultimately, the study found that "our consumption estimates of Chinook salmon by Steller sea lions were higher than estimates reported in previous studies of the region, which may be a factor of increased sea lion abundance, better data resolution, an increase in predation rates or some combination of those factors."[25] Similar challenges threaten the Puget Sound. A study from the Washington State Academy of Sciences found that "harbor seals are so numerous in Puget Sound that they still consume many salmon,"[26] and that "the impact of individual pinnipeds is a scale-wide issue for Puget Sound and the outer coast."[27]

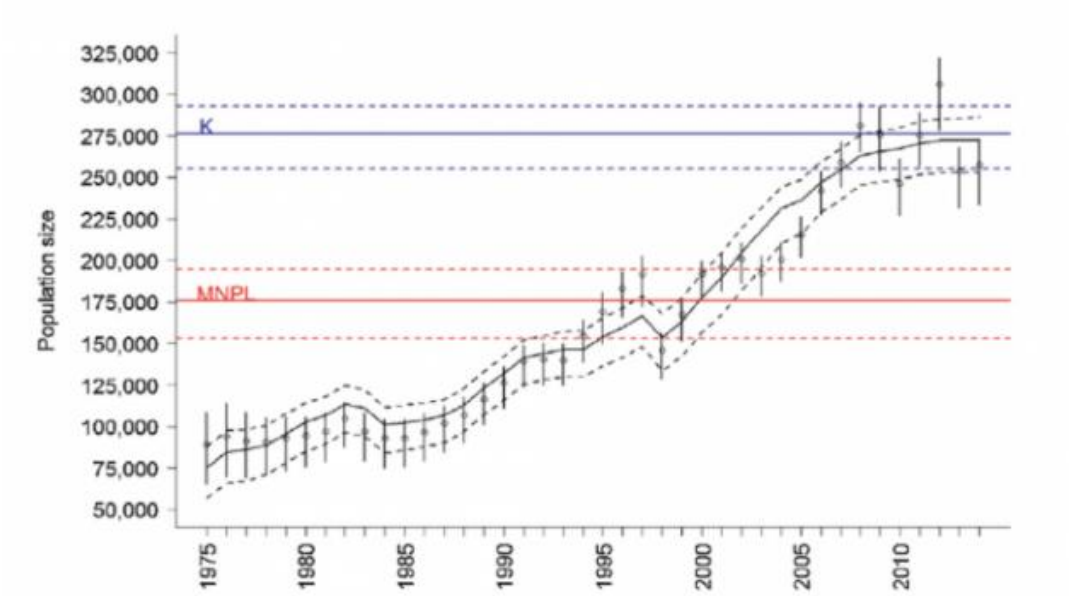

Figure 4: Growth of CA Sea Lions from 1975-2015 | Source: Puget Sound Institute at the University of Washington

[21] *Marine Mammals; Pinniped Removal Authority; Approval of Application*, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, September 5, 2025, www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2025-09-05/pdf/2025-16995.pdf.
[22] Grace Florendo, "New Study Details Stellar Sea Lion Consumption of Young Chinook Salmon off Washington Coast," Columbia Basin Bulletin, November 22, 2025, www.columbiabasinbulletin.org/new-study-details-stellar-sea-lion-consumption-of-young-chinook-salmon-off-washington-coast/.
[23] *Id.*
[24] *Id.*
[25] *Id.*
[26] *Pinniped Predation on Salmonids in the Washington Portions of the Salish Sea and Outer Coast*, Washington State Academy of Sciences, November 2022, https://wdfw.wa.gov/sites/default/files/publications/02579/wdfw02579.pdf.
[27] *Id.*

The Nisqually Indian Tribe has experienced similar challenges along the Nisqually River, near Olympia, Washington. In a workshop convened by the Washington State Academy of Sciences to study pinniped predation of salmon, Tribal participants presented data suggesting that "the age distribution within winter chum populations is shifting, likely due to predation"[28] from pinnipeds. The Tribe noted that increased pinniped predation is prevalent across the region.[29]

Figure 5: Harbor Seal | Source: Cindy R. Elliser/Pacific Mammal Research

Tribes and Tribal organizations, the states of Washington and Oregon, and other entities have devoted considerable resources to recovering salmon populations. Since 1991, the Nisqually Indian Tribe has operated Clear Creek Hatchery,[30] from which it transports as many as one million Chinook smolts each year.[31] Additionally, CRITFC's member tribes have restored more than 1,600 miles of river through projects funded by the Pacific Coast Salmon Recovery Fund.[32] These efforts comprise more than 250 projects totaling over $32 million.[33] Finally, a 2024 report from the Washington State Recreation and Conservation Office found that, to date, $2.1 billion has been invested in the state for "habitat-related elements identified in regional salmon recovery plans for 2010-2019."[34]

Importantly, numerous Tribes have reserved treaty fishing rights in the Puget Sound and Salish Sea. These rights were upheld in *United States v. Washington*, 520 F.2d 676 (9th Cir. 1974), also known as the Boldt Decision. The Boldt Decision recognized Tribes' reserved treaty fishing rights and rights to half the catch of salmon and steelhead fisheries.[35] The United States must balance its treaty obligations to Tribes with efforts to protect pinnipeds so that neither effort overpowers nor frustrates the other.

Congressional Oversight and the Path Ahead

In the seven years since the Endangered Salmon Predation Prevention Act was enacted, debates have continued over how to address conflicts between the MMPA's mandates and those of the ESA. NOAA's 2022 5-Year Review of Lower Columbia River Chinook Salmon, Columbia River Chum Salmon, Lower Columbia River Coho Salmon, and Lower Columbia River Coho acknowledges that pinniped predation on salmon and steelhead "continues to pose an adverse

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[28] *WSAS Committee on Pinniped Predation on Salmonids Summary of Stakeholder Workshop Pinniped Predation on Salmonids Committee. 2022.* https://washacad.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/WSAS_Summary_of_Pinniped_Predation_Stakeholder_Workshop_Report_Final.pdf

[29] *Id.*

[30] David Norberg, "Billy Frank Jr. Nisqually National Wildlife Refuge and the Nisqually River Watershed." HistoryLink.org, November 23, 2018, www.historylink.org/File/20671.

[31] "Nisqually Tribe Returns Chinook Run to McAllister Creek," Northwest Treaty Tribes, September 19, 2019, www.nwtreatytribes.org/nisqually-tribe-returns-chinook-run-to-mcallister-creek/.

[32] "Restoration Projects," CRITFC, www.critfc.org/fish-and-watersheds/fish-and-habitat-restoration/restoration-projects/.

[33] *Id.*

[34] *State of Salmon in Watersheds*, Washington State Recreation and Conservation Office, 2024, https://stateofsalmon.wa.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/ExecSummary-2024.pdf.

[35] "50 Years of the Boldt Decision," U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, https://www.fws.gov/story/50-years-boldt-decision.

impact on the recovery of these ESA-listed fish species" and that additional management efforts may be necessary to mitigate the impacts.[36].

Earlier this year, a bipartisan group of members in the Washington state legislature introduced House Joint Memorial 4004, in which they "respectfully pray[ed] that Congress modify the [MMPA] to 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."[37]

This issue extends beyond the Columbia River Basin, to the Nisqually River, the Puget Sound, and the entire Pacific Northwest. In this hearing, the Subcommittee will examine implementation of the Endangered Salmon Predation Prevention Act, evaluate the challenges posed by unmitigated growth in pinniped populations in the region, and evaluate potential solutions.

[36] *2022 5-Year Review: Summary & Evaluation of Lower Columbia River Chinook Salmon Columbia River Chum Salmon Lower Columbia River Coho Salmon Lower Columbia River Steelhead*, National Marine Fisheries Service West Coast Region, 2022, https://repository.library.noaa.gov/view/noaa/48670.
[37] *House Memorial 4004*, Washington State Legislature, https://lawfilesext.leg.wa.gov/biennium/2025-26/Pdf/Bills/House%20Joint%20Memorials/4004-Marine%20mammal%20protection%20act.pdf?q=20250714145731.