NATIONAL OCEANIC AND ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION
WRITTEN TESTIMONY OF
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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

OVERSIGHT HEARING
ON
SEAL PREDATION IN THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST

BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON WATER, WILDLIFE AND FISHERIES
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Introduction

Good morning, Chairwoman Hageman and members of the Subcommittee. I am Samuel D. Rauch III, Deputy Assistant Administrator for NOAA Fisheries Regulatory Programs. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on seal and sea lion (collectively, pinnipeds) predation on at-risk, threatened, and endangered salmon and steelhead in the Pacific Northwest, as well as the regulatory impacts of the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA).

NOAA is responsible for protecting marine mammal populations along the West Coast under the MMPA and for promoting the recovery of many fish, marine mammals, sea turtles, and other species listed as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

NOAA recognizes that pinniped predation is having a significant negative impact on the recovery of ESA-listed salmon and steelhead fishery stocks in certain areas of the Pacific Northwest, and targeted lethal take of pinnipeds is at times warranted to promote the conservation and recovery of certain stocks of salmonids or other fish. The MMPA contains existing provisions for this purpose (MMPA section 120 generally and MMPA section 120(f) for the Columbia River Basin); however, as indicated in prior reports and testimonies to Congress, this process as currently written has not been particularly effective at achieving the overall goal of balancing requirements of the ESA and the MMPA. Since 1994, NOAA has issued 12 authorizations pursuant to sections 120 and 120(f) of the MMPA to intentionally take predatory sea lions, and while these permits have helped reduce predation on salmonids at a small scale and in certain areas, they have been ineffective at moving the needle for salmonid recovery overall. As it stands, the MMPA does not currently provide regulatory flexibility for states and

Tribes to directly, and more effectively, reduce predation on salmonids by pinnipeds in the Pacific Northwest more broadly.

Ecological Context

NOAA is pleased to report that the MMPA has been a highly successful tool in the recovery of most stocks of seals and sea lions along the West Coast. For example, California sea lions have increased from an abundance of approximately 10,000 animals in the 1950s, to approximately 250,000 animals coast-wide today.

In contrast to robust West Coast seal and sea lion populations, many West Coast salmonid populations are doing poorly for a variety of reasons. Of 53 distinct population groups of Pacific salmonids, 28 are listed as threatened or endangered under the ESA.

Benefits of the Sea Lion Removal Programs

Since 2002, California and Steller sea lions have consumed an estimated 98,000 salmonids just at Bonneville Dam and Willamette Falls, Oregon, which we know represents only a fraction of the total number of salmonids they consume throughout the lower reaches of the Columbia and Willamette rivers. Through the 12 authorizations issued under the MMPA since 2008, the states have removed 514 California and Steller sea lions. Four of the 12 authorizations were issued to the state of Washington at Ballard Locks; five of the authorizations were issued to the states of Oregon, Washington, and Idaho at Bonneville Dam; and one authorization was issued to the state of Oregon at Willamette Falls. In addition to the authorizations under MMPA section 120, in 2020, NOAA issued an MMPA section 120(f) permit to the states and four Columbia Plateau treaty Tribes to intentionally take predatory California sea lions and Steller sea lions in the Columbia River Basin. On August 22, 2025, the NOAA Fisheries West Coast Regional Office issued states and Tribes a new MMPA section 120(f) permit to continue to remove predatory sea lions in the Columbia River Basin. While these removals have likely saved more than 110,000 adult salmonids from sea lion predation since the inception of the pinniped removal programs, the overall benefit of the program on salmonid recovery in the Pacific Northwest has been limited.

Conclusion

NOAA appreciates being invited before the committee to testify on this issue, and we look forward to working further with the committee to achieve the Administration's priorities under Executive Orders 14192 “Unleashing Prosperity Through Deregulation” and 14276 “Restoring American Seafood Competitiveness” to rebuild fisheries and support the long-term sustainability of fishing communities and to come up with solutions regarding this matter.