

Panel named to consider death penalty for salmon-eating sea lions

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The Associated Press

PORTLAND, Ore. (AP) — A panel of experts has been named to consider the death penalty for California sea lions that are eating an increasing number of endangered salmon trying to swim over Bonneville Dam.

NOAA Fisheries, the federal agency that oversees marine mammals and salmon, said Thursday 18 experts will review the proposal from the states of Oregon, Washington and Idaho to start killing sea lions that won't stop eating salmon at the dam.

The Pinniped-Fishery Interaction Task Force has representatives from government agencies, Indian tribes, fishing groups, the Oregon Zoo and the Humane Society of the United States. It has scheduled first meeting in Portland Sept. 4. It is to make a recommendation within two months. NOAA Fisheries is to make its decision by March.

The Marine Mammal Protection Act generally bars killing sea lions, but there are provisions to take out individuals if they are killing species such as salmon that are protected by the Endangered Species Act.

The states contend that eight different threatened and endangered runs of salmon and steelhead are being eaten by the sea lions.

Over the past 10 years, sea lions have been increasingly dining on the salmon that are stalled at the base of the fish ladder over Bonneville Dam, the first the fish encounter as they head upriver on the Columbia.

Despite efforts to drive them away with firecrackers and rubber buckshot, nearly 100 different sea lions were seen feeding on salmon at Bonneville this year. At the peak there were 50 in a single day, NOAA Fisheries said.

Agency biologists estimate that sea lions took about 3,500 fish this year, about 4 percent of the returning spawning population and the highest ever recorded.

Members of another species of sea lion, the Stellar, that have been seen eating white sturgeon at the dam are considered a depleted species under the Marine Mammal Protection Act, so they will not be considered for lethal removal, NOAA Fisheries said.

On the Web:

List of panel members: <http://www.nwr.noaa.gov/Marine-Mammals/Seals-and-Sea-Lions/Sec-120-TF.cfm>

Task Force Instructions:

http://www.nwr.noaa.gov/Marine-Mammals/Seals-and-Sea-Lions/upload/Sec_120_TF_instrs.pdf