

Larry Phillips, Pacific Fisheries Policy Director
American Sportfishing Association
Testimony on “Sea Lion Predation in the Pacific Northwest”
December 3, 2025

Chair Hageman, Ranking Member Hoyle, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Larry Phillips, and I serve as the Pacific Fisheries Policy Director for the American Sportfishing Association. ASA represents the country’s recreational fishing industry and the many businesses whose livelihoods depend on healthy salmon and steelhead runs across the Pacific Northwest.

Recreational fishing is part of the identity of this region. From Puget Sound to the Columbia River Basin and along the coasts of Washington and Oregon, salmon seasons support thousands of jobs, strengthen local economies, and carry forward cultural and family traditions.

Nationwide, recreational fishing contributes more than 230 billion dollars annually, and anglers directly invest nearly 2 billion dollars a year into conservation.

For decades, federal, state, and tribal partners – as well as anglers – have invested heavily in salmon recovery through habitat restoration, hatchery modernization, harvest reform, and hydropower mitigation. But one major factor continues to erode those gains: pinniped predation on salmon and steelhead.

Today’s pinniped populations are healthy, fully protected, and significantly larger than when systematic surveys began in the 1970s, following passage of the Marine Mammal Protection Act. While we cannot precisely quantify pre-contact abundance, science shows these populations have rebounded dramatically in the modern era and many stocks are at or above their optimum sustainable population levels. That recovery is a conservation success, but it also means predation pressure on salmon has grown far beyond what recovery efforts were designed to absorb.

In the Columbia River, sea lions that were nearly absent in the 1990s can consume a significant portion – estimated as high as ~40 percent – of the spring Chinook run in a single season. Thanks to the leadership of Senator Risch, Senator Cantwell, Representative Newhouse, Representative Schrader and others, the 2018 Endangered Salmon Predation Prevention Act provided targeted tools, and early results show improved salmon survival.

But the MMPA still prevents meaningful action in many areas where predation is most acute.

In Puget Sound, harbor seals consume 6 to 14 percent of juvenile Chinook annually and as much as one-third of steelhead smolts in certain estuaries. Along the Washington and Oregon coasts, Steller sea lions consumed more than two million juvenile Chinook in just eight months. These losses undo gains made through habitat restoration, hatchery reform, and harvest constraints. And outside the Columbia River, managers lack a workable path under current law to intervene.

I want to acknowledge that this is a polarizing and emotional topic. Pinnipeds are an important part of the ecosystem, and their recovery is a real success of the MMPA. We also appreciate the

thoughtful, science-driven work already being done by federal, state, and tribal co-managers, often under very limited authority. Our goal is not to diminish those efforts but to ensure managers have the balanced tools needed to conserve both salmon and pinnipeds.

To support recovery, ASA urges Congress to consider several targeted, science-based updates to the MMPA:

- First, create a streamlined pathway for managing predatory pinnipeds in Puget Sound and along the Washington and Oregon coasts by expanding the location-based approach in Section 120(f).
- Second, extend management authority to predation hot spots including Puget Sound, both coasts, and Columbia River tributaries such as the Cowlitz and Lewis rivers.
- Third, provide dedicated federal funding to support monitoring, removals, and ongoing scientific analysis.
- Fourth, extend MMPA management authority to Washington's treaty tribes and work collaboratively with Oregon's tribal governments.
- Finally, pinniped management must complement – not replace – investments in habitat, hatcheries, hydropower mitigation, and harvest reforms. But we must be honest: continuing to spend billions on recovery and continually restricting fisheries, without meaningfully addressing predation, will produce a predictable outcome – and it will not be recovery.

The sportfishing community cares deeply about conservation. We want future generations to fish for salmon across the Northwest. To achieve that, we must address all limiting factors, including marine mammal predation.

Thank you for your time and for your continued leadership. I look forward to your questions.