



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Sea lion-salmon dilemma weighed

fish + fishing *12-598*
Supervisors urged to back plan to remove marine-mammal protection

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✓ **SANTA CRUZ** — One day last year, Santa Cruz fisherman Kevin Carney hooked 85 salmon on his lines.

“We lost 55 of them to sea lions,” Carney said. “We got so disgusted that we quit fishing salmon and went for rock cod instead.”

Santa Cruz fisherman Wilson Quick says seals and sea lions have learned to take salmon from fishing nets and tackle.

The clash between salmon and sea lions — between fishermen and sea lions — is the story of one protected species' comeback at the expense of another. Wildlife experts say that if something isn't done, federally protected sea lions and seals may eat federally protected salmon and steelhead into oblivion.

And that sets up natural conflict between marine-mammal advocates and fishermen who want the sea lion protections lifted to allow “lethal removal” — shooting — under certain circumstances.

The debate moves to the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors Tuesday, when fishing interests will seek a resolution asking Congress to

remove sea lions from the endangered species list.

“The populations of marine mammals in the Monterey Bay are out of balance with the fish population, and in some cases sea lion and seal populations are ‘out of control,’” Gary Lease, who chairs the county Fish and Game Advisory Commission, wrote in a letter to the supervisors.

“Such an imbalance between prey and predator species can have a serious, perhaps even decisive, negative effect upon efforts to aid an endangered species such as the coho salmon,” he said.

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Sea lions

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After years of complaints from fishermen, and bolstered by a growing body of scientific evidence, federal wildlife officials last February asked Congress for authority to kill sea lions and harbor seals that feast on endangered fish at "unnatural" settings, such as fish ladders below dams, and when they endanger humans at facilities like public beaches and marinas.

The National Marine Fisheries Service also asked Congress to reinstate provisions of federal law that allow commercial fishermen to kill seals and sea lions that destroy their catch if harassment techniques fail.

The wildlife regulators said that while the sea lions are not the only explanation for dwindling fish populations, the mammals are moving in and preventing their recovery.

"Given the depressed and often critical status of some salmonid populations on the West Coast and the robust status of California sea lion and Pacific harbor seal populations, salmonids need to be given precedence when conflicts arise between these protected species," said the report to Congress.

That recommendation has angered animal-rights activists and those involved in protecting sea lions.

The real cause of the fishes' decline are dams, logging and diversion of water to agriculture, said Susan Andres, spokeswoman for the Marine Mammal Center in Sausalito. She said the dams have blocked stream and river access and created convenient feeding stations for sea lions while logging has degraded water quality.

Andres said sea lions have had a minimal impact on fish populations.

"We are in support of exploring methods of deterring sea lions, but we're not in support of lethal measures," she said.

The National Marine Fisheries Service estimated that since passage in 1972 of the Marine Mammal Protection Act, the sea lion population has been growing by more than 5 percent a year to a estimated population of 167,000 to 188,000 on the West Coast.

Pacific harbor seal numbers are estimated at 78,000 along the coast and have a similar growth rate.

A dozen or so sea lions used to hang out under the Santa Cruz Municipal Wharf, said city wharf employee Rob Langdon. Now there are about 100.

"There seems to be more and more every year," he said.

The mammals have tremendous appetites. The average sea lion, weighing about 400 pounds, can consume up to 40 pounds of fish in a day, according to Fish and Game estimates.

The county Fish and Game Advisory Committee in October unanimously endorsed the federal proposal and

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has asked the supervisors to do the same.

Commissioners cited photos taken from 1994 to 1998 of returning steelhead and salmon in the San Lorenzo River and other Santa Cruz County streams. Between 30 to 60 percent appeared to have injuries or scars.

Proponents of lifting the sea lion protections maintain that what has happened in the ocean has been largely ignored while conservationists focused on restoring fish habitat in the rivers.

"Saving the habitat is nice, but the survival problem of salmonids is in the ocean environment," said Bob Briggs, a Swanton resident who had monitored conditions in Scott Creek for decades.

Commercial fishermen report losing up to 90 percent of their hooked salmon to sea lions, according to Lease.

Carney estimates he's lost \$10,000 worth of salmon to sea lions this year. "They get so much food out of our nets and gear they don't have to hunt for them."

Rogue sea lions have learned to follow sports, party and commercial fishing boats from both the Santa Cruz harbor and the wharf, according to the fishermen.

"As soon as we get a fish on the gear, they take it," said Wilson Quick, a Santa Cruz fisherman. "It's a feast for them."

Fisherman Britt Hoberg said sea lions watch for the tell-tale wiggle of fishing gear as their signal to move in for lunch. "They know exactly when you have it on the line. They're really keyed in on that."

Even more devastating, they say sea lions have learned to wait at the mouths of the San Lorenzo River, Scott and Waddell creeks, preying on returning salmon and steelhead attempting to make their runs over shallow sandbars to reproduce.

"The last thing we want to see is lethal removal," said Santa Cruz fisherman Buck Arbsland. "But something needs to be done because of what's going on with the salmon and steelhead."

The county Board of Supervisors will meet at 9 a.m. Tuesday at the County Government Center, Fifth Floor, 701 Ocean St., Santa Cruz.