

Sea lions keep safe harbor

Animals Welfare

Santa Cruz County won't endorse lifting animals' protection

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Although other governmental agencies up and down the Pacific coast have signed on to a federal plan calling for the thinning of the California sea lion population to save salmon fisheries, Santa Cruz County will apparently remain a sanctuary for the huge pinnipeds.

The board of supervisors Tuesday refused to endorse a study that calls for the removal of sea lions, as well as harbor seals, from the federal Marine Mammal Protection Act. The study also calls for killing the voracious animals if necessary to protect salmon and steelhead.

But county supervisors said information in the study, "Report to Congress on the Impacts of California Sea Lions and Pacific Harbor Seals on Salmonids and West Coast Ecosystems," is incomplete. The study, prepared by the National Marine Fisheries Service, was given to Congress in February.

According to the report, the population of sea lions has burgeoned in California's offshore waters at the same time that fishermen have reported drastic drops in their catches during seasons when the animals are in the area.

Some board members made it clear Tuesday they would probably never vote to endorse the killing of sea lions. What they did was to send the matter back to their own Fish and Game Advisory Commission for a public hearing. That commission, which reported it had been studying the issue for seven years, had asked

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supervisors to endorse the Report to Congress.

Supervisor Jeff Almquist said he believed there was "abundant evidence that the sea lion and the harbor seal have dramatically flourished" in recent years. But he told his colleagues, "I am not willing to support the shooting of sea lions so fishermen can get larger takes" of salmon and steelhead.

Supervisor Mardi Wormhoudt took the lead against the recommendation of the fish and game committee.



MERCURY NEWS FILE PHOTOGRAPH

Fishermen say sea lions are stealing their salmon catch, but the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors refused to endorse a report that recommends lifting protections and thinning their population.

'Extreme position'

"We do not have the information ... to take the rather extreme position" of the fish and game advisory group, she said, branding "the specter of people killing sea lions and harbor seals" as "rather grim."

"There is no reason for the board of supervisors to make this recommendation to Congress," Wormhoudt said.

Although several speakers said there was not enough evidence to prove sea lions are depleting the salmon fishery, others testified that the animals hurt fishing for commercial and sport anglers.

Washington, Oregon and California, along with several coastal counties in the Golden State, have endorsed the Report to Congress, according to a member of the county fish and game commission.

By the year 2003, "the sea lions will be eating the same tonnage of salmonids as the tonnage of fish eat-

en by the entire population of the United States," said commissioner Rich Hughett.

Hughett, executive director of the Fishermen's Alliance of California, said sea lions harm the fishery in Monterey Bay more than elsewhere in the state. He said there are now about 250,000 sea lions along America's Pacific coast, more than three times their population just a decade ago.

And, he said, the animals are now taking striped bass, swordfish, catfish and rockfish and, he warned, have even attacked humans.

Shooting sea lions was OK

"In the old days," Hughett said, fishermen were allowed to shoot sea lions preying on their catches. But in 1994, he said, when the federal Ma-

rine Mammal Protection Act was renewed, that power was taken away.

He said the Report to Congress foresees the use of trained human "wardens" who would be called on when it was necessary to kill a sea lion.

Wormhoudt told Hughett that the sea lion problem "is that they compete with us for food. They want to eat salmon. We want to eat salmon. So we kill them."

Pointing to a chart that, he said, proved that the sea lion population boom was consistent with a severe decline in the salmonid population, Hughett said that unless the mammals are thinned out, "this could be the final blow to salmon and steelhead."

But fisheries biologist Dan Alley told supervisors he thought "there is no evidence" that the animals are

harming the salmon fishery.

And noting that humans catch the fish for food, he said: "It doesn't matter who kills them. They're going to be dead anyway."

The fish and game advisory body was instructed to hold a public hearing before reporting to the board of supervisors in March.

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