



Oppose HB 2131 and SB 5851: Tricking Boat Owners into Paying to Kill Intelligent, Social Sea Lions Under the False Pretense of Saving Salmon

HB 2131 and **SB 5851** would require the state Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) to provide an opportunity for people registering their boats to donate to “salmon preservation” through the “management” of pinnipeds in the lower Columbia River.

- **HB 2131/SB 5851 would fool boat owners into donating money under false pretenses.** These bills would mislead members of the public into unwittingly supporting the killing of seals and sea lions under the false promise that doing so will help save threatened and endangered salmon. They would require WDFW to allow people registering their boats to donate to “salmon preservation by the management of pinniped populations in the lower Columbia River.” Most people do not know that, in this case, “management” is code for “killing.” Nor do they know that every \$203 they donate would, at best, temporarily “save” a single salmon. It would be fiscally irresponsible to encourage people to donate to such an ineffective program, and unethical to do so without full disclosure.
- **Sea lions eat relatively few salmon at the Bonneville Dam.** From fall 2019 to spring 2024, the Army Corps of Engineers estimates sea lions have eaten an average of 0.28% of the adult Chinook salmon attempting to pass the dam in the fall, 2.78% of the adult Chinook passing in the spring, and 0.16% of the fall coho salmon (see reports for [2020](#), [2021](#), [2022](#), [2023](#), and [2024](#)). There is no estimate for how many of these fish would have died of multiple other causes before spawning.
- **Most of the salmon affected are of hatchery origin.** Estimates indicate that only about 20% of the salmon that return to spawn in the Columbia River are wild-origin fish, meaning that between 2019 and 2024, sea lions likely ate only about 0.06% of the returning wild Chinook in the spring, and 0.6% of the wild Chinook runs in the fall. Sea lions may actually help improve the health of wild salmon populations by consuming hatchery fish before they reach spawning grounds, since hatchery fish that spawn weaken the genetic adaptability and reproductive success of wild fish.
- **Sea lions are scapegoats for problems humans have created.** Seals, sea lions, and fish-eating birds often congregate in areas where humans have created bottlenecks that lead to artificially high fish concentrations, such as at the Bonneville Dam, where salmon must navigate fish ladders to get upstream. Until we address these problems,



native predators will continue to return to these areas, creating an endless cycle of killing that fails to address the underlying causes of salmon declines.

- **Killing sea lions will not save salmon or orcas.** Since 2008, managers have “removed” 457 sea lions below the Bonneville Dam (killing all but 15), but this effort has shown no appreciable benefit to wild salmon populations, which continue to decline. There is also no evidence that killing sea lions will help endangered Southern Resident orcas. We need a comprehensive approach to salmon recovery that relies on science to address the primary obstacles to wild salmon recovery: overfishing, habitat degradation, hydropower dams, and hatchery production.
- **Killing sea lions is unpopular.** During the 2020 federal permit application process to expand lethal removals at the Bonneville dam, the National Marine Fisheries Service received more than 22,000 public comments, fewer than 1% of which supported killing sea lions. In 2018, only 25% of people commenting on Washington’s Orca Task Force report supported killing pinnipeds to benefit salmon.
- **Killing sea lions is inhumane.** Sea lions are exceptionally intelligent, with cognitive abilities comparable to those of 3- to 5-year-old children. They are also highly social, developing deep bonds with one another, and showing affection by cuddling, grooming, and even holding flippers. They have been observed comforting one another in times of distress and mourning the loss of close companions and family. When they sense danger (such as if they are caught in traps), sea lions become very agitated, “screaming” and thrashing. Shooting them is even less humane, as necropsies of sea lions who have been shot show they often suffer from shattered vertebrae, broken ribs, and internal organ damage before they die.
- **The fund would waste money better spent on meaningful measures.** Killing sea lions is not only ineffective; it is expensive. It costs roughly \$38,000 to kill each sea lion, which, under the most generous projections, would mean \$203 spent for each fish “saved.” Directing public donations toward predator control creates the appearance of action without delivering meaningful recovery benefits. It also diverts scarce resources away from projects that address the primary causes of salmon decline, like habitat restoration, fish passage improvements, and other recovery investments that offer far greater ecological return and long-term value.