



Oppose HJM 4004: Don't weaken landmark wildlife protections to scapegoat and kill marine mammals

HJM 4004 would ask President Trump and Congress to weaken the U.S. Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) to “allow greater flexibility for states and tribes” to kill seals and sea lions across Washington’s marine waters and Puget Sound. Instead of confronting the human decisions that have driven salmon decline, this memorial advocates dismantling landmark wildlife protections and advances a worldview in which animals become expendable whenever they interfere with any human demands, despite little evidence of any meaningful conflict.

- **HJM 4004 aligns Washington with efforts to dismantle federal wildlife protections.** By urging Congress and the Trump Administration to weaken the Marine Mammal Protection Act, this memorial reinforces a broader push to erode foundational wildlife laws, including the Endangered Species Act and Migratory Bird Treaty Act—laws enacted to stop the kind of unrestrained killing and ecological harm that defined earlier eras of wildlife policy.
- **“Greater flexibility” is a euphemism for expanded killing, and pretending otherwise is disingenuous.** By asking Congress to weaken the Marine Mammal Protection Act without defining limits or safeguards, HJM 4004 invites broad liberalization of killing within federal policy that Washington has no control over. Given the current federal discourse around pinnipeds, expecting anything other than broad authorization for killing is naïve. Lawmakers who support this memorial will have sanctioned these outcomes and will be held publicly accountable for the widespread and highly visible killing that would follow.
- **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.
- **Pinnipeds are scapegoated under a false narrative of “conflict” that is not supported by the evidence.** From fall 2019 to spring 2024, the Army Corps of Engineers estimates sea lions at the Bonneville Dam 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](#)). Moreover, 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.

- **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.
- **Expanded killing of pinnipeds risks cascading ecological harm.** Seals and sea lions play important roles in complex marine food webs and consume a wide range of prey, including (non-native) salmon predators and competitors such as northern pikeminnow, Pacific hake, common carp, and American shad. The Washington State Academy of Sciences (WSAS) has cautioned that altering pinniped abundance can produce ecosystem effects that are [“essentially impossible to predict with certainty,”](#) including changes in other predators and competitors **that may offset or worsen impacts on salmon**—demonstrating why killing is a reckless and unjustified intervention.
- **This bill promotes killing without first exploring feasible, humane alternatives.** The WSAS identifies artificial haul-outs and other [human-created structures as key drivers of observed pinniped predation on salmon and suggests exploring non-lethal deterrents](#), yet this bill would facilitate killing carnivores before first exploring more humane and feasible options, like removing artificial haulouts. Weakening the Marine Mammal Protection Act to expand killing before non-lethal options are meaningfully pursued entrenches killing as the norm, not the last resort.
- **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.



- **Washington should be defending wildlife protections, not pushing for their erosion.** At a moment of accelerating biodiversity loss and ecological instability, HJM 4004 sends a dangerous message: that when humans face the consequences of our own choices, the solution is to weaken protections and kill other beings who are simply trying to live. A state that claims progressive values should be leading with humility, care, and responsibility—not lobbying for the dismantling of laws designed to restrain our worst impulses.