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Honorable Speaker Ryan
Honorable Leader Pelosi
Honorable Chairman Bishop
Honorable Ranking Member Grijalva

As directors of the co-managing agencies charged with conserving fish and wildlife in Oregon, Washington, and Idaho, we are writing to express our support for HR 2083, the Endangered Salmon and Fisheries Predation Prevention Act, with amendments proposed by our three agencies and the Columbia River treaty tribes. Passage of this legislation is critical to ensuring we can manage the ever-increasing issue of predation on sturgeon, lamprey, and Endangered Species Act (ESA)-listed salmon and steelhead in the Columbia Basin.

Our agencies are acutely aware of the many issues facing salmon, steelhead, and sturgeon in the basin. We continue to advocate for actions to the hydro-system, hatcheries, harvest, and habitat to support the recovery of this region's iconic fish runs. However, if we avoid taking the hard step of managing sea lions in the basin, recovery will be all the more difficult for some stocks, while others will be placed on a rapid pathway to extinction. We have already seen this happen at Ballard Locks in Washington. Sea lions are not a scapegoat, but managing predation is now an essential part of recovering fish runs in the Columbia.

As amended, HR 2083 ensures that we retain the strong environmental protections of the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) and the National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA), while allowing managers the flexibility to manage sea lions in the Columbia basin. The changes proposed in the bill will allow the MMPA and the ESA to work together to benefit both fish and sea lions.

- HR 2083 provides managers flexibility to proactively remove sea lions that are foraging on ESA-listed salmon, steelhead, and sturgeon over 100+ miles from the ocean. These are locations where sea lions did not historically forage. Over a decade of scientific research has shown that 1) the diet of sea lions at these locations is almost exclusively salmon, steelhead, and sturgeon and 2)

once sea lions locate these areas, they return year after year. It only makes sense to recognize the body of science that has accumulated on this issue and adjust our management accordingly to prevent sea lions habituating to these areas.

- Sea lion predation is not just an issue at the dams. Increasingly we are observing sea lions forage in many of the undammed tributaries to the lower Columbia River. Many of these tributaries contain our healthiest salmon and steelhead populations and have large tracts of pristine habitat. These runs are critical to recovering the larger salmon and steelhead Evolutionary significant units (ESU). Without passage of HR 2083 we can do nothing to prevent sea lions gaining a toehold in these areas which, as we have seen at Willamette Falls and Ballard Locks, places the fish on a pathway to extirpation before action can be taken.
- HR 2083 will have no impact on sea lion populations. National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) recently published a paper demonstrating that California sea lions are at carrying capacity. Their population in the United States is projected to fluctuate between 250,000-300,000 individuals in the foreseeable future. Additionally, NOAA is required under the MMPA to calculate the Potential Biological Removal (PBR) level, or the number of animals that could be removed from the population without affecting its viability. For California sea lions, that number is currently 9,200. As a margin of safety, the proposed legislation caps the removals at no more than 10% of this number, for a total annual removal not to exceed 920. This is an extremely conservative number when put in context of the overall population. Moreover, in the Columbia River, there are only around 300 sea lions exhibiting the problem behavior, and they are all males. Thus, removal of these few animals will have no impact on the population.
- HR 2083 ensures the process currently used to oversee permitting and program implementation stays intact. Before new permitting there will be a NEPA review, a public comment period, and a taskforce process. After a permit is issued, the federally appointed taskforce is required to evaluate the program annually and make recommendations to NMFS to improve its effectiveness.
- HR 2083 does not expand the limit on the number of animals that may be lethally removed. Current law provides no limit to the number that the National Marine Fisheries Service may authorize states to remove. HR 2083 strengthens this by placing a basin-wide cap on removal numbers that is linked to best available science. This means that if sea lion populations ever decline, the number of animals States and Treaty Tribes can remove will also decline.

Our agencies are committed to ensuring our iconic salmon, steelhead, and sturgeon are conserved for current and future generations and that we have healthy and thriving pinniped populations. We would be deeply grateful for your acknowledgement that the issue of pinniped predation in the Columbia River must be addressed legislatively. We cannot thank you enough for your support on this issue.

Sincerely,



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