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April 16, 2026

The Honorable Howard Lutnick
Secretary
U.S. Department of Commerce
1401 Constitution Ave NW
Washington, DC 20230

Dear Secretary Lutnick,

I write to draw your attention to an issue of increasing urgency and consequence: the predation of salmon and steelhead by sea lions as they encroach further and further up the Columbia River and its tributaries, and the resulting impacts on local fishermen and the regional economy. I request your partnership in identifying effective strategies and pursuing appropriate administrative actions to expand removal authorities for pinnipeds in the Columbia River, specifically in regards to the Marine Mammal Protection Act's (MMPA) protection for California and Steller sea lions east of River Mile 66 to the McNary Dam.

I live along the Columbia River in Skamania County, near the Bonneville Dam, and I've seen firsthand the hard work that goes into managing the sea lion population and preserving our local fisheries and tributaries. But the current authorities are not working. At times, sea lions have eaten four times as many salmon as our fishermen and Tribes have harvested in the Columbia River in a year. During the 2025 spring season, nearly one-fourth of fish at Bonneville Dam show wounds from sea lion bites.

When Congress amended the MMPA in 2018 to expand removal authorities in the Columbia River, it provided that eligible managers could remove up to 540 California sea lions and 176 Steller sea lions during the five-year life of the take permit. During that time, the managers removed 111 of both species, nowhere near the permissible amount.

This shortcoming is due to the arduous process of removal, which purports to be humane, but is profoundly convoluted and borders on theater. As currently prescribed in Section 120(f) of the MMPA, managers must capture these Toyota Corolla-sized creatures in traps, remove them from the river, chemically euthanize them with darts with a licensed veterinarian present, then transport the carcasses to a tertiary location for disposal and autopsy.

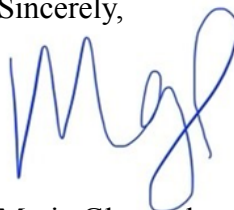
The financial and cultural impacts are unsustainable. Some accounting methods estimate a price tag of nearly \$38,000 per sea lion or \$203 per salmon recovered in costs associated with complying with the current regulatory process. When grocery prices are at record highs, it is insulting to my community to waste taxpayer dollars while fishermen continue to be denied their ability to put food on the table for their families.

I am working in Congress to bring home the resources our community needs to cost-effectively and humanely balance this ecosystem. At the same time, we need the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), in close partnership with states and Tribes, to examine what strategies yield the best results for pinniped removals—including direct, lethal removal. Last year’s House Report 119-272 accompanying the Fiscal Year 2026 Commerce, Justice, and Science Appropriations bill directed NOAA to study which pinniped removal strategies are most cost-effective and humane. I urge your assistance with the Department to complete this assessment. While this work is critical, our fish and fishermen need more urgent solutions.

Currently, Section 120(f) of the MMPA provides eligible managers with removal authority from River Mile 112, just east of Camas, to the McNary Dam and its tributaries. But the sea lions are getting in much further east. By River Mile 66, at the Cowlitz River where the Lewis and Clark Bridge crosses, the water is no longer salty enough to replicate traditional sea lion habitat. These species don’t naturally live in water this fresh, and therefore we should be able to begin removals at this point. Allowing takes in this 46-mile stretch of the river would let managers address a much broader portion of the sea lions in the Columbia River, catching them before they feast on the fish upstream.

I respectfully request your partnership to ensure our managers have the authority for flexible management that adapts to the trends we are seeing in sea lion population numbers.

Sincerely,



Marie Gluesenkamp Perez
Member of Congress

CC: The Honorable Donald J. Trump
President of the United States of America
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
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