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HARBOR SEAL (*Phoca vitulina richardsi*): Washington Inland Waters Stock

STOCK DEFINITION AND GEOGRAPHIC RANGE

Harbor seals inhabit coastal and estuarine waters off Baja California, north along the western coasts of the continental U.S., British Columbia, and Southeast Alaska, west through the Gulf of Alaska and Aleutian Islands, and in the Bering Sea north to Cape Newenham and the Pribilof Islands. They haul out on rocks, reefs, beaches, and drifting glacial ice, and feed in marine, estuarine, and occasionally fresh waters. Harbor seals generally are non-migratory, with local movements associated with such factors as tides, weather, season, food availability, and reproduction (Scheffer and Slipp 1944; Fisher 1952; Bigg 1969, 1981). Harbor seals do not make extensive pelagic migrations though some long distance movement of tagged animals in Alaska (174 km) and along the U.S. west coast (up to 550 km) have been recorded (Pitcher and McAllister 1981, Brown and Mate 1983, Herder 1986). Harbor seals have also displayed strong fidelity for haul out sites (Pitcher and Calkins 1979, Pitcher and McAllister 1981).

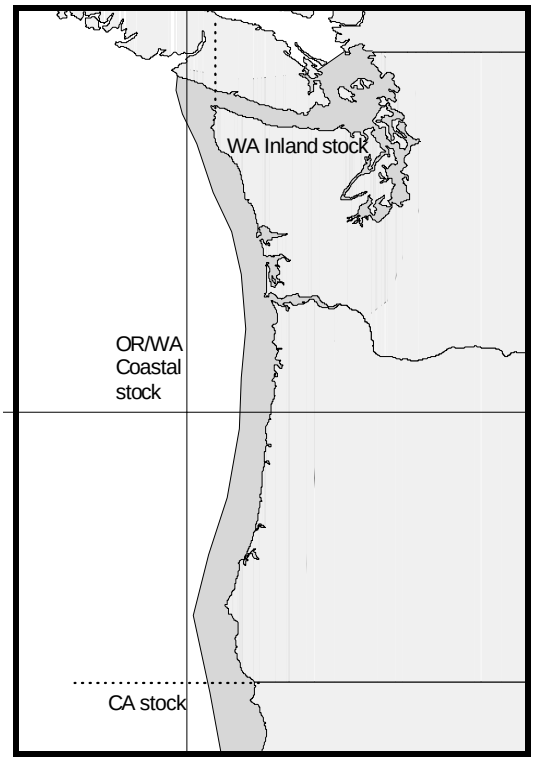

Figure 1. Approximate distribution of harbor seals in the U.S. Pacific Northwest (shaded area). Stock boundaries separating the three stocks are shown.

For management purposes, differences in mean pupping date (Temte 1986), movement patterns (Jeffries 1985, Brown 1988), pollutant loads (Calambokidis et al. 1985) and fishery interactions have led to the recognition of 3 separate harbor seal stocks along the west coast of the continental U.S. (Boveng 1988): 1) inland waters of Washington State (including the Hood Canal, Puget Sound, and Strait of Juan de Fuca out to Cape Flattery), 2) outer coast of Oregon and Washington, and 3) California (see Fig. 1). Recent genetic analyses provide additional support for this stock structure (Huber et al. 1994, Burg 1996, Lamont et al. 1996). Samples from Washington, Oregon, and California demonstrate a high level of genetic diversity and indicate that the harbor seals of inland Washington possess unique haplotypes not found in seals from the coasts of Washington, Oregon, and California (Lamont et al. 1996). This report considers only the Washington Inland Waters stock. Harbor seal stocks that occur in the inland and coastal waters of Alaska are reported separately in the Stock Assessment Reports for the Alaska Region.

POPULATION SIZE

Aerial surveys of harbor seals in Washington were conducted during the pupping season in 1999, during which time the total number of hauled-out seals (including pups) were counted. In 1999, the mean count of harbor seals occurring in Washington's inland waters was 9,550 (CV=0.14) animals (Jeffries et al. in press).

Radio-tagging studies conducted at 6 locations (3 Washington inland waters sites and 3 Oregon and Washington coastal sites) collected information on haulout patterns from 63 harbor seals in 1991 and 61 harbor seals in 1992. Data from coastal and inland sites were not significantly different and were thus pooled, resulting in a correction factor of 1.53 (CV=0.065) to account for animals in the water which are missed during the aerial surveys (Huber et al. 2001). Using this correction factor results in a population estimate of 14,612 (9,550 x 1.53; CV=0.15) for the Washington Inland Waters stock of harbor seals (Jeffries et al. in press).

Minimum Population Estimate

The log-normal 20th percentile of the 1999 population estimate for this stock is 12,844 harbor seals.

Current Population Trend

Historical levels of harbor seal abundance in Washington are unknown. The population apparently decreased during the 1940s and 1950s due to a state-financed bounty program. Approximately 17,133 harbor seals were killed in Washington by bounty hunters between 1943 and 1960 (Newby 1973). The population remained relatively low during the 1970s but, since the termination of the harbor seal bounty program in 1960 and with the protection provided by the passage of the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) in 1972, harbor seal numbers in Washington have increased (Jeffries 1985).

Between 1983 and 1996, the annual rate of increase for this stock was 6%. From 1991 to 1996, this stock increased 10% (t=5.28; p=0.034) annually, with the peak count occurring in 1996. The higher rate of increase in recent years may be due to emigration of harbor seals from the Canadian waters of the Strait of Georgia to the San Juan Islands (Jeffries et al. 1997).

CURRENT AND MAXIMUM NET PRODUCTIVITY RATES

From 1991 to 1996, counts of harbor seals in Washington State have increased at an annual rate of 10% (Jeffries et al. 1997). Because the population was not at a very low level by 1991, the observed rate of increase may underestimate the maximum net productivity rate (R_{MAX}). When a logistic model was fit to the 1978-1999 abundance data, the resulting estimate of R_{MAX} was12.6% (95% CI = 9.4-18.7%) (Jeffries et al. in press). This value of R_{MAX} is very close to the pinniped default value of 12%, therefore, the pinniped default maximum theoretical net productivity rate (R_{MAX}) of 12% will be employed for this harbor seal stock (Wade and Angliss 1997).

POTENTIAL BIOLOGICAL REMOVAL

The potential biological removal (PBR) level for this stock is calculated as the minimum population size (12,844) times one-half the default maximum net growth rate for pinnipeds (½ of 12%) times a recovery factor of 1.0 (for stocks of unknown status that are increasing in size, Wade and Angliss 1997), resulting in a PBR of 771 harbor seals per year.

HUMAN-CAUSED MORTALITY AND SERIOUS INJURY

Fisheries Information

NMFS observers monitored the northern Washington marine set gillnet fishery during 1994-1998 and in 2000; there was no observer coverage in 1999 (Gearin et al. 1994, 2000; P. Gearin, unpubl. data). For the entire fishery (coastal + inland waters), observer coverage ranged from approximately 33 to 98% during observed years. Fishing effort is conducted within the range of both stocks of harbor seals (Oregon/Washington Coast and Washington Inland Waters stocks) occurring in Washington State waters. For the purposes of this stock assessment report, the animals taken in the inland portion of the fishery are assumed to have belonged to the Washington Inland Waters stock and the animals taken in the coastal portion of the fishery are assumed to have belonged to the Oregon/Washington Coast stock. Some movement of animals between Washington's coastal and inland waters is likely, although data from tagging studies have not shown movement of harbor seals between the two locations (Huber et al. 2001). Accordingly, Table 1 includes data only from that portion of the northern Washington marine set gillnet fishery occurring within the range of the Washington Inland Waters stock (those waters east of Cape Flattery), where observer coverage ranged from 6 to 80% between 1994 and 2000. From 1990 to 1993, fishing effort ranged from 215-469 net days per year (1 net day equals a 100-fathom length net set for 24 hours) in the inland portion of the fishery. Fishing effort decreased in subsequent years, ranging from 4-39 net days per year in 1994-2000, except in 1996 when effort equaled 99 net days. In 1994, the observer program was delayed because the biological opinion on the fishery, relating to takes of marbled murrelets under the ESA, was not completed by the time the fishery began. One vessel fished in both the coastal and inland portions of the fishery in 1994 and 39% of the sets in the inland fishery were observed. Although no harbor seal mortalities were observed in the inland fishery, the vessel operator reported 24 harbor seal mortalities before the observer program began. Since it could not be determined whether these animals were taken in the inland or coastal part of the fishery, half of the mortalities (12) were attributed to the inland portion of the fishery and listed as self reported data in Table 1. There was no observer program in 1999, however, the total fishing effort was only 4 net days

(in inland waters) and no marine mammal takes were reported. Data from 1994-2000 are included in Table 1, although the mean estimated annual mortality is calculated using the most recent 5 years of available data. No harbor seal mortalities were observed or reported in this fishery from 1995 to 2000. The mean estimated mortality for this fishery is zero harbor seals per year from this stock.

In 1993, as a pilot for future observer programs, NMFS in conjunction with the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) monitored all non-treaty components of the Washington Puget Sound Region salmon gillnet fishery (Pierce et al. 1994). Observer coverage was 1.3% overall, ranging from 0.9% to 7.3% for the various components of the fishery. Two harbor seal mortalities were reported (Table 1). Pierce et al. (1994) cautioned against extrapolating these mortalities to the entire Puget Sound fishery due to the low observer coverage and potential biases inherent in the data. The area 7/7A sockeye landings represented the majority of the non-treaty salmon landings in 1993, approximately 67%. Results of this pilot study were used to design the 1994 observer programs discussed below.

Table 1. Summary of available information on the incidental mortality and injury of harbor seals (Washington Inland Waters stock) in commercial and tribal fisheries that might take this species and calculation of the mean annual mortality rate; n/a indicates that data are not available. All entanglements resulted in the death of the animal. Mean annual takes are based on 1996-2000 data unless noted otherwise.

Fishery name	Years	Data type	Percent observer coverage	Observed mortality	Estimated mortality	Mean annual takes (CV in parentheses)
Northern WA marine set gillnet (tribal fishery: inland waters)	94 95 96 97 98 99 00 94-00	obs data self reports	39% 24% 6% 80% 40% 0% 58% 	0 0 0 0 0 n/a 0 12, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0	0 0 0 0 0 n/a 0 	0[1] 0
WA Puget Sound Region salmon set/drift gillnet (observer programs listed below covered segments of this fishery):	-	-	-	-	-	-
Puget Sound non-treaty salmon gillnet (all areas and species)	93	obs data	1.3%	2	n/a	see text
Puget Sound non-treaty chum salmon gillnet (areas 10/11 and 12/12B)	94	obs data	11%	1	10	10 (n/a)
Puget Sound treaty chum salmon gillnet (areas 12, 12B, and 12C)	94	obs data	2.2%	0	0	0
Puget Sound treaty chum and sockeye salmon gillnet (areas 4B, 5, and 6C)	94	obs data	7.5%	0	0	0
Puget Sound treaty and non-treaty sockeye salmon gillnet (areas 7 and 7A)	94	obs data	7%	1	15	15 (1.0)
				Reported mortalities		
WA Puget Sound Region salmon set/drift gillnet	94-00	self reports	n/a	n/a, n/a, n/a, n/a, n/a, n/a, n/a	n/a	see text

Fishery name	Years	Data type	Percent observer coverage	Observed mortality	Estimated mortality	Mean annual takes (CV in parentheses)
WA salmon net pens	97-00	self reports	n/a	10, 5, 0, 0	n/a	$\geq$ 3.8 (n/a)
Unknown Puget Sound fishery	96-00	strand data	n/a	2, 1, 1, 0, 2	n/a	$\geq$ 1.2 (n/a)
Minimum total annual takes						$\geq$ 30 (1.0)

[1]1995-98 and 2000 mortality estimates are included in the average.

In 1994, NMFS in conjunction with WDFW conducted an observer program during the Puget Sound non-treaty chum salmon gillnet fishery (areas 10/11 and 12/12B). A total of 230 sets were observed during 54 boat trips, representing approximately 11% observer coverage of the 500 fishing boat trips comprising the total effort in this fishery, as estimated from fish ticket landings (Erstad et al. 1996). One harbor seal was taken in the fishery, resulting in an entanglement rate of 0.02 harbor seals per trip (0.004 harbor seals per set), which extrapolated to approximately 10 mortalities for the entire fishery. The Puget Sound treaty chum salmon gillnet fishery in Hood Canal (areas 12, 12B, and 12C) and the Puget Sound treaty sockeye/chum gillnet fishery in the Strait of Juan de Fuca (areas 4B, 5, and 6C) were also monitored in 1994 (NWIFC 1995). No harbor seal mortalities were reported in the observer programs covering these treaty salmon gillnet fisheries, where observer coverage was estimated at 2.2% (based on % of total catch observed) and approximately 7.5% (based on % of observed trips to total landings), respectively.

Also in 1994, NMFS in conjunction with WDFW and the Tribes monitored the Puget Sound treaty and non-treaty sockeye salmon gillnet fishery (areas 7 and 7A). During this fishery, observers monitored 2,205 sets, representing approximately 7% of the estimated number of sets in the fishery (Pierce et al. 1996). There was one observed harbor seal mortality (two others were entangled and released unharmed), resulting in a mortality rate of 0.00045 harbor seals per set, which extrapolated to 15 mortalities (CV=1.0) for the entire fishery.

In 1996, Washington Sea Grant Program conducted a test fishery in the non-treaty sockeye salmon gillnet fishery (area 7) to compare entanglement rates of seabirds and marine mammals and catch rates of salmon using three experimental gears and a control (monofilament mesh net). The experimental nets incorporated highly visible mesh in the upper quarter (50 mesh gear) or upper eighth (20 mesh gear) of the net or had low-frequency sound emitters attached to the corkline (Melvin et al. 1997). In 642 sets during 17 vessel trips, there were two harbor seal mortalities (one other was released alive with no apparent injuries).

Combining the estimates from the northern Washington marine set gillnet (0) fishery, the Puget Sound non-treaty chum salmon gillnet fishery in areas 10/11 and 12/12B (10), and the Puget Sound treaty and non-treaty sockeye salmon gillnet fishery in areas 7 and 7A (15) results in an estimated minimum annual mortality rate in observed fisheries of 25 harbor seals from this stock. It should be noted that the 1994 observer programs did not sample all segments of the entire Washington Puget Sound Region salmon set/drift gillnet fishery and, further, the extrapolations of total kill did not include effort for the unobserved segments of this fishery. Therefore, 25 is an underestimate of the harbor seal mortality due to the entire fishery. The percentage of the overall Washington Puget Sound Region salmon set/drift gillnet fishery effort that was observed in 1994 was not quantified. However, the areas having the highest salmon catches and in which a majority of the vessels operated in 1994 were covered by the 1994 observer programs (J. Scordino, pers. comm.). Harbor seal takes in the Washington Puget Sound Region salmon drift gillnet fishery are unlikely to have increased since the fishery was last observed in 1994, due to reductions in the number of participating vessels and available fishing time (see details in Appendix 1). Fishing effort and catch have declined throughout all salmon fisheries in the region due to management efforts to recover ESA-listed salmonids.

An additional source of information on the number of harbor seals killed or injured incidental to commercial fishery operations is the self-reported fisheries information required of vessel operators by the MMPA. Fisher self-reports from 1994-2000 for the Washington Puget Sound Region salmon set/drift gillnet fishery are shown in Table 1. Unlike the 1994 observer program data, the self-reported fishery data cover the entire fishery (including treaty and non-treaty components) and have thus been included in the table. There were fisher self-reports of 15 harbor seal mortalities due to entanglement in Washington salmon net pens in 1997-2000, 10 in 1997 and 5 in 1998 (Table 1), resulting in an

estimated annual mortality of 3.8 harbor seals from this stock. However, because logbook records (fisher self-reports required during 1990-94) are most likely negatively biased (Credle et al. 1994), these are considered to be minimum estimates. Logbook data are available for part of 1989-1994, after which incidental mortality reporting requirements were modified. Under the new system, logbooks are no longer required; instead, fishers provide self-reports. Data for the 1994-1995 phase-in period is fragmentary. After 1995, the level of reporting dropped dramatically, such that the records are considered incomplete and estimates of mortality based on them represent minimums (see Appendix 7 in Angliss et al. 2001 for details).

Strandings of harbor seals entangled in fishing gear or with injuries caused by interactions with gear are a final source of fishery-related mortality information. During the period from 1996 to 2000, small numbers of fishery-related strandings of harbor seals have occurred in most years. As the strandings could not be attributed to a particular fishery, they have been included in Table 1 as occurring in an unknown Puget Sound fishery. Fishery-related strandings during 1996-2000 resulted in an estimated annual mortality of 1.2 harbor seals from this stock. This estimate is considered a minimum because not all stranded animals are found, reported, or examined for cause of death (via necropsy by trained personnel).

The minimum estimated fishery mortality and serious injury for this stock is 30 harbor seals per year, based on observer program data (25), fisher self-reports (3.8), and stranding data (1.2).

Other Mortality

According to Northwest Marine Mammal Stranding Network records, maintained by the NMFS Northwest Region, a total of 20 human-caused harbor seal mortalities or serious injuries were reported from non-fisheries sources in 1996-2000. Seventeen animals were shot (4, 7, 2, 1 and 3 each year, respectively), 1 was struck by a ship, and 2 had head or neck injuries, resulting in an estimated mortality of 4 harbor seals per year from this stock. This estimate is considered a minimum because not all stranded animals are found, reported, or cause of death determined (via necropsy by trained personnel).

Subsistence Harvests by Northwest Treaty Indian Tribes

Several Pacific Northwest treaty Indian tribes have promulgated tribal regulations allowing tribal members to exercise treaty rights for subsistence harvest of harbor seals. There have been only a few reported takes of harbor seals from directed tribal subsistence hunts. It is possible that very few seals have been taken in directed hunts because tribal fishers use seals caught incidentally to fishing operations for their subsistence needs before undertaking a ceremonial or subsistence hunt. From communications with the tribes, the NMFS Northwest Regional Office (J. Scordino, pers. comm.) believes that 0-5 harbor seals from this stock may be taken annually in directed subsistence harvests.

STATUS OF STOCK

Harbor seals are not considered to be "depleted" under the MMPA or listed as "threatened" or "endangered" under the Endangered Species Act. Based on currently available data, the level of human-caused mortality and serious injury (30 + 4 + 0-5 = 34-39) is not known to exceed the PBR (771). Therefore, the Washington Inland Waters stock of harbor seals is not classified as a "strategic" stock. At present, the minimum estimated fishery mortality and serious injury for this stock (30) appears to be less than 10% of the calculated PBR (77) and, therefore, appears to be insignificant and approaching zero mortality and serious injury rate. The stock size has increased in recent years, although at this time it is not possible to assess the status of the stock relative to its Optimum Sustainable Population (OSP) level.

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