



# United States Department of the Interior

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE  
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Portland, Oregon 97232-4181

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IN REPLY REFER TO:  
ARW/OPR

Craig S. Harrison  
Vice Chair for Conservation  
Pacific Seabird Group  
4001 North Ninth Street, #1801  
Arlington, Virginia 22203

Dear Mr. Harrison:

Thank you for your letter regarding the Caspian tern population in the Pacific Northwest. We appreciate your concern about the Rice Island tern colony and the efforts of Federal, State, and Tribal entities to manage this population to aid salmon recovery efforts. Like the Pacific Seabird Group, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) is committed to protecting Caspian terns and other migratory birds in the Columbia River estuary and elsewhere.

As a member of the Caspian Tern Working Group (CTWG), the Service provided technical assistance to the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) and the Corps of Engineers (COE) on the development of the tern relocation pilot project. We supported the short-term effort as an experimental, emergency measure to decrease avian predation on listed salmonids. This support was predicated on the development of nesting habitat of suitable quality and quantity to support the Rice Island birds, and implementation of appropriate relocation techniques. We recommended leaving a larger colony on Rice Island (> 1,000 birds), which would not be harassed, until we could determine the success of the East Sand Island colony site. We consistently advocated for a comprehensive assessment of all the factors influencing salmon recovery and a step-wise approach in relocating the tern colony. However, the final decision regarding project timing, harassment, and the Rice Island colony size rested with the NMFS.

Initial signs for the pilot relocation project are encouraging. In late March, the Service contributed \$20,000 to remedy problems encountered during the habitat restoration work on East Sand Island. The additional work was successful in eliminating drainage problems and the researchers reported eight acres of suitable nesting habitat. This site is comparable in size to the former Rice Island colony site. As of June 7, a maximum of 10,000 terns have been observed in the colony area on Rice Island and another 2,500 terns have been sighted in two satellite colonies. Tern numbers observed at the East Sand Island colony site have reached 1,450. An estimated 5,000 nests with eggs or chicks are on Rice Island with an additional 740 nests on East Sand Island.

Observations of bill loads to date indicate that 66 percent of the fish coming in to East Sand Island are salmonids versus 96 percent salmonids at Rice Island. As the nesting season progresses, we will be able to determine the success of this project in reducing seabird consumption of salmon smolts. Management actions beyond the 1999 nesting season have not yet been determined. However, it is the Service's intention to maintain a healthy population of Caspian terns within the Columbia River estuary as well as the entire Pacific Northwest.

The NMFS is also seeking to develop a long-term avian predation management plan. The Service has argued that further studies are needed to determine the extent to which avian predation affects listed salmon and whether predation losses have a significant impact on adult spawner returns. This information is needed prior to developing and implementing long-term avian predation management actions.

The impact of avian predation on salmon recovery is unclear and needs to be examined in light of all the other factors affecting recovery. For example, 1999 jack returns in the Columbia River are the highest reported in the last 10 years. These returns suggest that ocean conditions and factors affecting ocean survivorship play a much greater role in salmon survivorship than avian predation. A review of the Oregon Plan for Salmon and Watersheds by an independent multi disciplinary science team noted that "there is no compelling scientific evidence that predation has been a primary cause for recent decline of salmonids." This team recommended that "Current efforts and resources should be focused on other areas that are more effective in achieving recovery of stocks." The Service will continue to advocate for a comprehensive assessment of the factors influencing salmon survivorship prior to long-term management of avian predators.

I appreciate your recommendation to develop and implement a regional plan to restore former Caspian tern colony sites in Oregon and Washington. We are currently considering the development of a regional seabird management plan which would address monitoring and management of all seabird populations, including Caspian terns. Management actions, such as nesting habitat enhancement, restoration, or development will be considered, evaluated, and pursued as deemed appropriate and feasible. These actions may include the restoration of former nesting sites, such as East Sand Island, or the development of alternative sites. The limitations associated with land ownership, and concerns regarding listed salmonids along the entire Oregon and Washington coastlines, will require that habitat management for terns and other seabirds be a partnership effort among Federal, State, Tribal, and private interests. In the interim, we will continue to advocate for the sound management of Caspian terns and other seabird populations in the Pacific Northwest.

I understand that you believe an emergency listing of the Caspian tern under the Endangered Species Act of 1973, as amended, may be needed. The option to petition this species for listing is always open to you, although I encourage you to wait until more data become available and future management planning for the terns in the Columbia River estuary is developed. We hope that any future management planning will result in continued healthy Caspian tern populations, as well as contribute to salmon recovery.

I hope that I have addressed your concerns and again, thank you for your interest in the Pacific Northwest Caspian tern population. If you have further concerns, please contact Carol Schuler at 503-231-6159 or Tara Zimmerman at 503-231-6164.

Sincerely,



Regional Director

**ACTING**

cc:

Caspian Tern Working Group - Chair, Ben Meyer  
National Marine Fisheries Service - Ben Meyer, Rob Jones, Herb Pollard  
Army Corps of Engineers - Bob Willis  
National Audubon Society - Paul Englemeyer  
American Bird Conservancy - Gerald Winegrad  
Endangered Species, Listing and Recovery - Catrina Martin