

SEAL CONSERVANCY OF SAN DIEGO

P.O. Box 2016 • La Jolla, CA 92038
(858) 349-0613 • www.sealconservancy.org



Facts About the 2013 – 2015 California Sea Lion Starvation Crisis

Justin Viezbicke, the NOAA Stranding Coordinator for the NMFS West Coast Region, along with a marine biologist/researcher from NOAA in Washington DC, held a meeting at the Pacific Marine Mammal Center three weeks ago to update the staff on the sea lion crisis. Another Board member and myself were also in attendance.

NOAA scientists and researchers are reporting that the ocean temperatures off southern California have risen a few degrees from normal in late winter and spring. These “el Niño-like” conditions are being caused by a weak atmospheric jet stream that isn’t acting normally this year, causing the unusually warm water temperatures. The warmer water temperatures are driving cold-water fish such as sardines and anchovies far off shore and into much deeper waters because they are seeking colder temperatures. This is affecting the coastal regions as well as the Channel Island areas where the sea lion rookeries are found. The sea lion population largely depends on masses of schooling sardines and anchovies and sufficient quantities of these fish are not currently present in the traditional sea lion feeding areas.

Sea lion pups in southern California are born in June and July. They normally stay with the mother for 6-8 months. The 8-9 month old pups are the ones suffering the most because they’re inexperienced at finding food and the mother is having to spend much longer periods of time away from the pup looking for food for herself. Also, the mother is undernourished so the quality of her milk is poor.

NOAA reps said that under normal circumstances, a mother will leave her pup on its own for 2-3 days while she’s feeding, but now she’s typically gone for 7-10 days. As a result, it’s hard for her to reunite with her pup -- and because she’s gone for so long, the pup may decide the mother is not coming back. The pup will then go out on its own, even though it’s not sufficiently prepared to fend for itself.

The NOAA reps said they started to be alarmed last November – December (2014) that another sea lion crisis was developing and would become a major catastrophe in early 2015. (This is the 3rd year of this type of crisis in a row, starting in 2013)

In late 2014, NOAA biologists were studying the body weights of the sea lions in the Channel Island rookeries and were alarmed that a large number were underweight – many by as much as 40%. They didn't find any physical problems or illness to explain this, which is why they concluded that it was a food resource issue.

The NOAA biologists were asked why the harbor seals are not being affected and the answer is because of a different diet. Harbor seal eat about 6% of their body weight daily and do feed on sardines and anchovies when available, but they also eat rockfish, kelpfish, squid, crustaceans, cephalopods and mollusks.

One topic the NOAA reps never talked about was the concern of over fishing. Reports indicate that the worldwide sardine population peaked in the 1950's, and has been in an overall decline since then. There are some years when they're abundant but the overall trend is downward. In the 1950's and early 1960's, new modernized fishing ships were developed (draggers and trawlers). These ships have been removing massive amounts of biomass from the oceans ever since. Sardines and anchovies are valuable for many uses, and after decades of targeting these fish with large worldwide fleets and massive nets, their numbers are significantly down.

NOAA / NMFS has the seemingly contradictory mandate of being charged with protecting the oceans, while simultaneously maintaining sustainable fisheries. These two missions can and do frequently conflict with one another. NOAA typically avoids taking any regulatory action.

Seal Conservancy of San Diego
www.sealconservancy.org