

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT THE CASPIAN TERN DRAFT ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT

July 2004

Q: Why is a Draft Environmental Impact Statement being done for Caspian tern management in the Columbia River estuary?

We developed the Draft EIS to determine the best way to manage Caspian tern predation on endangered and threatened salmon smolts in the Columbia River estuary. The EIS was required as part of a settlement agreement between the National Audubon Society, Defenders of Wildlife, Seattle Audubon Society and the American Bird Conservancy and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers on Caspian tern management in the Columbia River estuary.

Q: What does the Draft EIS address?

The Draft EIS describes four possible alternatives for decreasing the predation of young salmon by Caspian terns in the Columbia River estuary and lowering the risk of a catastrophic event impacting the unnaturally large concentration of terns on one island. About 70 percent of the Pacific Coast/Western population of Caspian terns nests on East Sand Island in the estuary.

Q: What alternatives are being considered?

The alternatives being considered in the Draft EIS are:

Alternative A: Status Quo (continue to clear 6 acres of habitat for terns to nest on East Sand Island)

Alternative B: No management (let vegetation naturally grow on East Sand Island, forcing the birds to nest elsewhere)

Alternative C: (Preferred Alternative) Enhance habitat in certain areas in Washington, Oregon and California in order to attract approximately 5,000 to 6,500 terns away from East Sand Island. Some birds (about 2,500- 3,125 pairs) would still nest on the island, but their nesting area would be reduced from 6 acres to 1-1.5 acres.

Alternative D: Reduce nesting area on East Sand Island to 1-1.5 acres and implement lethal control program on adult birds.

Q: What is the Preferred Alternative in the Draft EIS?

The Preferred Alternative (Alternative C) proposes to reduce tern predation on juvenile salmonids in the Columbia River estuary by redistributing some of terns that nest in the Columbia River estuary to other sites throughout the Pacific Coast/Western region. This would be achieved by reducing the tern nesting site on East Sand Island as described above and managing a total of about 8 acres at various other sites in Oregon, Washington and California

that are specifically managed for displaced terns. Potential management sites considered in this alternative include Dungeness National Wildlife Refuge in Washington, Summer, Crump and Fern Ridge lakes in Oregon, and three sites in San Francisco Bay. All areas are publicly owned and managed.

Q: Who developed the Draft EIS?

The Draft EIS was developed by three Federal agencies: the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries) and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Q: Why are three agencies working on it?

All three agencies committed to collaborating on the EIS during the lawsuit settlement. Each of the agencies has responsibilities under various Federal laws that affect the management of Caspian terns and/or salmon. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has responsibility for Caspian terns under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. The National Marine Fisheries Service has responsibility for salmon. The U.S. Corps of Engineers owns East Sand Island and has obligations to manage this and several other islands with potential tern-nesting habitat in the Columbia River estuary.

Q: Why is it necessary to manage Caspian terns?

There is an unnatural concentration of nesting terns on East Sand Island, with approximately 70 percent of the Pacific Coast/Western region population nesting at this single location. The concentration of terns on East Sand Island results in consumption of a large number of federally listed salmon species and makes the birds vulnerable to large population losses due to storms, predators, human disturbance, and disease.

Q: Why do so many Caspian terns nest on East Sand Island?

Caspian terns have concentrated in the Columbia River estuary because historic nesting sites have been lost elsewhere in the Pacific Coast/Western region and human-created dredge-spoil islands in the estuary offered stable nesting habitat close to abundant supplies of fish. The large and concentrated runs of salmon smolts (mostly hatchery-reared) offer a unique food supply sufficient to support this large number of birds. A tern colony of this size has never before been documented.

Q: What has been done so far to help reduce Caspian tern predation on threatened Columbia River salmon smolts?

In 1986, about 1,000 Caspian terns began nesting on Rice Island, located 15 miles upstream from the mouth of the Columbia River. By 1998, the colony had grown to include about 9,000 breeding pairs. In 1999 and 2000, management agencies and researchers worked together to relocate the Rice Island tern colony downstream to East Sand Island, closer to the Pacific Ocean, where, in addition to salmon smolts, many other marine fish are available for terns to eat. The colony relocation from Rice Island to East Sand Island significantly changed the diet of nesting terns and reduced the number of salmon smolts eaten by terns by 66 percent.

Q: Did this relocation effort impact terns in the estuary?

No. Terns nested on East Sand Island within the first year of the relocation project. By 2001, the entire tern colony relocated to East Sand Island and in 2002, the tern colony increased to nearly 10,000 pairs.

Q: Are Columbia River salmon still threatened even though adult salmon have been returning at record levels in recent years?

Yes. While a number of hatchery and listed wild salmon runs are exhibiting marked improvement in recent years, it will take many years of strong returns to show that wild Columbia River salmon are truly recovering. Summer Chinook are returning at levels not seen since the 1950s and spring chinook adult returns are expected to be the second largest since counting began in 1938. The largest steelhead return on record occurred in 2002. These are stocks and age classes that out-migrated past the Rice Island tern colony when tern predation was at its peak in 1999 and 2000. Favorable ocean conditions are most likely contributing to the strong returns, but continued conservation efforts, such as improving smolt survival through dams, barging smolts around dams, and habitat enhancement will also play a role in salmon recovery.

Q: Why is additional management necessary?

Managers are concerned that Caspian terns still eat a substantial number of listed salmon smolts in the Columbia River estuary. Many efforts are underway to help recover endangered salmon throughout the Columbia River Basin. Dispersing some of the birds off East Sand Island may also benefit the Caspian tern population in the Pacific Coast Region by reducing their vulnerability to catastrophic events such as disease, storms, predators and human disturbance.

Q: How many sites were considered during the EIS scoping process for establishing Caspian tern colonies?

The Service completed a feasibility study in which 77 possible sites, from San Diego Bay to Puget Sound and east to Idaho and Nevada, were examined. The list of alternate sites was refined during the EIS scoping process in Spring 2004. The seven sites presented in the Draft EIS were chosen from among the original 77.

Q: What makes a good site?

A good site is typically an island with bare sand or exposed gravel, free of human disturbance, with few or no predators, requires little or no habitat enhancement, and has an abundance of food for terns. Nesting sites need not be large. Terns nest closely together in dense colonies and several thousand birds can successfully nest together on only an acre or two.

Q: Are the agencies trying to relocate the entire colony from East Sand Island?

No. Caspian terns are native to the Columbia River estuary and East Sand Island will continue to be managed as an important tern colony. Our preferred alternative proposes to maintain 1 to 1.5 acres of nesting habitat on the island for approximately 2,500 to 3,125 breeding pairs. Based on

historic survey information, colonies at alternate sites are projected to range from 100 to 3,500 breeding pairs in Washington, 5 to 300 pairs in Oregon and 100 to 1,500 pairs in California.

Q: Are the terns from East Sand Island expected to successfully relocate to the sites proposed in the preferred alternative?

Yes. Many of the 7 sites already have nesting terns. Caspian terns are highly social birds that nest in colonies. Social attraction techniques such as tern decoys and recorded tern sounds will be used if necessary to attract terns to newly created nesting habitat. Social attraction techniques have been successful in establishing or re-establishing colonies of Caspian terns and other tern species.

Q: Will additional sites just spread out the problem of terns eating young salmon?

No. Restoring, creating and enhancing nesting habitat for Caspian terns described in the preferred alternative is designed to accommodate smaller colonies at each site. This will reduce the potential impact to individual salmon runs because the number of birds feeding on salmon at each site will be low, and the number of fish species they will be eating will be more varied.

Q: What's next in the process?

A final EIS is expected to be published in February 2005. More information on this project can be found at <http://migratorybirds.pacific.fws.gov/cate.htm>

Q: How can I comment on the Draft EIS?

A: Written comments on the Draft EIS must be submitted by September 20, 2004 to Nanette Seto, Migratory Birds and Habitat Programs, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 911 N.E. 11th Avenue, Portland, Oregon 97232 or faxed to 503-231-2019, or sent by e-mail to cateeis@r1.fws.gov

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