



## **CORPS CHOOSES 'NO ACTION' ON GULL PREDATION OF TERNS ON LOWER COLUMBIA'S EAST SAND ISLAND**

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The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has decided that "no action" is the best action for addressing the phenomenon of glaucous-winged/western gulls plundering nests of Caspian terns on the lower Columbia River's East Sand Island.

A draft environmental assessment produced by the Corps last month suggested that, following three years of low-to-zero tern productivity at the island, action be taken to reduce the gulls' looting of nests on what in recent years has been the largest colony of Caspian terns on the West Coast and, it is believed, in the world. Those proposed actions included the lethal removal of up to 150 gulls this year, as well as the hazing of gulls that were seen perching on the perimeter of the Caspian tern colony.

But a National Environmental Policy Act "finding of no significant impact" issued this week says that no action is necessary.

Since the draft was released, a flood of comment has been received by the Corps, most objecting to the gull removal alternative. And the Corps has had a chance to review scientific data that indicates gull predation is not likely to force terns off the island to locations where they might increase their intake of protected salmon and steelhead.

Since the late 1990s the Corps' Portland District has been researching, monitoring and managing Caspian terns on islands the Corps owns and/or uses to dispose of dredged material in the Columbia River estuary to assess impacts the predatory birds have on salmon and steelhead. Many of the fish stocks are protected under the Endangered Species Act.

In 1999, the Corps began a project to socially attract the terns, using decoys and playing pre-recorded callbacks, from the primary colony site on Rice Island downstream to East Sand Island. East Sand, owned and managed by the Corps, is closer to the ocean and surrounding waters offer more marine species as alternative prey for the terns. The result has been a decrease the numbers of juvenile salmon and steelhead consumed by the terns.

The gull removal plan was intended to help the Caspian terns rest easy on East Sand, and prevent a relocation to sites upriver where their primary source of food would be young salmon. But new studies indicate the terns are at East Sand to stay.

New information received by the Corps in recent weeks during the public comment period "questioned the fundamental assumption that Caspian terns likely are to immediately abandon the East Sand Island colony and therefore put into question the Corps' legal authority to take action," the May 13 FONSI says.

"This information suggests that most of Caspian terns that come to the lower Columbia River Estuary, whether they are actively breeding or have failed at breeding, continue to utilize East Sand Island throughout their time in the estuary and in spite of consecutive years of low to no reproductive success, the terns continue to exhibit surprising nest site fidelity and continue to

nest or attempt to nest at East Sand Island.

"Surveys from 2010-2012 show that colony attendance and nesting density have remained high, even during periods of low productivity (measured as egg and chick survival) suggesting that Caspian terns (whether actively breeding or not) are committed to East Sand Island.

For the last three nesting seasons (2010-2012), productivity for the colony has been at an all-time low. This low productivity is largely attributed to bald eagles disturbing the colony to the point that the adult terns abandon their nests at which point glaucous-winged/western gulls waiting on the outskirts of the colony move in to consume the tern eggs and chicks. In 2011 the colony did not produce a single fledgling.

Acting on recommendations made by a multi-agency work group, the Corps prepared a draft EA (Draft Environmental Assessment- Adaptively Manage Predation on the Caspian Tern Colony in the Lower Columbia River Estuary) in April 2013 with a proposed action (Alternative B) to lethally remove up to 150 gulls, use green-light lasers and place gull effigies on the colony to prevent the potential for nesting failure and abandonment ultimately to prevent potential for increased consumption of juvenile salmonids. The adaptive management team was made up of representatives of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, NOAA Fisheries, Bonneville Power Administration and the Corps.

"We received about 80 responses during our comment period, most of which were concerned about the possibility of the Corps removing up to 150 gulls," Joyce Casey, the Corps' chief of Environmental Resources Branch, said of her agency's decision to take a "no action" approach. "We also received new research findings during our analysis that showed it was very unlikely the terns would leave East Sand Island for new habitat farther upstream."

"The purpose of the Environmental Assessment was to analyze the consequences of our proposed actions on juvenile salmonids," said Cindy Studebaker, a Corps fish biologist. "We were able to use results from recent studies to show our assumptions based on past research wasn't complete."

The Corps will continue to monitor East Sand Island and the other new tern habitats it constructed as it continues to implement the Caspian Tern Plan, a group of documents created by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Corps in 2006. An inter-agency adaptive management team began discussing the effectiveness of the plan in 2012 and will offer recommendations on any new actions needed. The interagency team is made up of biologists and researchers from the Corps, U.S. Fish and Wildlife, NOAA Fisheries, and Bonneville Power Administration.

The FONSI is available for public review under the "Announcements" section at <http://www.nwp.usace.army.mil>

With birds flying north and settling in large numbers on East Sand, the dance has begun again.

"Caspian tern colony on East Sand Island continues to be disturbed by bald eagles that visit the colony routinely in the early morning and late afternoon; these disturbances cause 75-100 percent of nesting terns to flush and leave their nest unattended for up to a minute before they return to the colony; when tern nests are left unattended, 15-20 glaucous-winged/western gulls comb the colony and take between 7-15 tern eggs/disturbance from the colony, generally from nests that are located at the periphery of the colony," according to the May 6-12 update report produced by Bird Research Northwest, an ongoing research program investigating the ecology

of piscivorous colonial waterbirds (primarily, Caspian terns, double-crested cormorants, American white pelicans, and several gull species) and their impacts on the survival of juvenile salmonids in the Columbia Basin and elsewhere along the Pacific Coast.

"A major colony disturbance occurred at 2100 hours on 7 May, causing 100 percent of the terns to leave their nests for 20-30 minutes (cause of disturbance unknown)."

Caspian terns are "continuing to fill in the 1.58-acre designated tern colony area on East Sand Island; high count during week of ca. 12,400 adult terns were counted on the colony, with most terns attending nest scrapes with eggs," the weekly update says.

Tern reproductive activity would appear to be proceeding, despite the disturbances.

"I think it's too early to tell" if the bald eagle-gull assaults will disrupt the tern processes, said Ken Collis, a consultant who is co-principal investigator for the long-running research project.

Weather and other factors contributed to the past three years' reproductive collapse, "but it's pretty obvious that gulls were the driving factor," Collis said.

Still, the long-lived terns have shown an affinity, and a faithfulness, to the East Sand habitat. It's also too early to tell, Collis said, whether repeated nesting disruptions will hurt the overall health of the tern population, or scare them away.

For more information see CBB, June 10, 2011 "Bald Eagles' Predation Decimates Columbia's Salmon-Eating Tern Colony; Cormorants Also Hit Hard" <http://www.cbbulletin.com/409747.aspx>

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