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Orca and salmon advocates welcome Governor Inslee's creation of an emergency orca task force

A series of near-term actions and the establishment of an action-oriented task force in the executive order reflects the serious crisis facing the Southern Resident orcas and the urgent need for meaningful salmon restoration and other measures.

SEATTLE – Leaders of the *Orca Salmon Alliance* welcomed Governor Inslee's announcement of an [Executive Order](#) creating an emergency task force in order to better meet the urgent needs of critically endangered Southern Resident orcas (killer whales). In addition to the task force, the Order also includes several immediate actions that can begin to address the causes of orca decline in the near-term, including a severe lack of prey, excessive toxic levels, and vessel noise and disturbance.

Starting this spring, the task force will identify and recommend a series of near-term and long-term recovery actions. The experiences and participation of Tribal leaders in Washington State will be critical to the success of this effort.

Some near-term actions in the executive order include the development of concrete plans to better protect orcas from vessel noise and disturbance, increased on-the-water law enforcement patrols, funding to tackle polluted runoff in key Chinook salmon areas, expanded hatchery programs and critical habitat restoration for Chinook salmon.

The leaders of the Orca Salmon Alliance welcome Governor Inslee's leadership to highlight the plight of Southern Resident orcas and the Chinook salmon populations that they depend upon. We look forward to working closely with the Governor and his team, the Tribal community, and state and regional stakeholders to move forward quickly to develop and implement an effective, science-based action plan.

Cindy Hansen, representative of Orca Network: "Orca advocates appreciate Governor Inslee's leadership in recognizing the urgent plight of our Southern Resident orcas and the need for immediate action. The new task force represents a tremendous opportunity to

make the big changes that are needed to meet the needs of our local orcas and put them on a path to recovery.”

Robb Krehbiel, Northwest representative for Defenders of Wildlife: “The Governor’s task force and early actions are an excellent first step to focus our state and region on the perilous condition of this unique community of orcas. Successfully pulling them back from the brink of extinction will require a sustained effort and everyone’s contributions. We applaud the Governor for taking this step and stand ready to work with him and his team to ensure success.”

Joseph Bogaard, executive director of the Save Our wild Salmon Coalition: “Orca need more salmon to survive and recover. This must be a top priority for this new task force. Dramatic improvement in our state and regional salmon restoration efforts – in the Salish Sea and in the Columbia Basin – are essential to our struggling salmon populations and all that rely on them – including of course orca, other fish and wildlife, and tribal and non-tribal fishing communities.”

Rein Attemann, Puget Sound Campaign Manager at Washington Environmental Council adds: “Only 76 Southern Resident Killer Whales remain, and the population is declining – they are starving because they do not have enough salmon to eat, toxics in their bodies are harmful, and vessels interfere with their ability to forage and communicate. We are grateful for the Governor’s initiative to create the Orca Emergency Task Force that will consider all viable options to craft and implement actions that will help prevent the extinction of this iconic and beloved resident orcas.”

“Our Southern Resident Orca Whales are an international treasure and their future is in our hands”, adds Chris Wilke, Puget Soundkeeper. “This is a critical challenge of our time and we have some tough choices ahead on our watch. It’s great to see Governor Inslee and Washington State taking a step forward in the fight for their survival.”

Background: As a highly social, highly mobile apex predator, Southern Resident orcas have inhabited the marine waters of the Pacific Northwest for hundreds of thousands of years. The three pods – J, K and L – split their time traveling in the Salish Sea and along the continental shelf between southern British Columbia and northern California in search of the big fatty chinook salmon that make up more than 80% of their diet.

Whale scientists have long recognized the importance of Fraser River Chinook to these orcas, especially in the summer months, but research involving satellite tags, passive acoustic monitoring, and fecal sample and hormones analyses in recent years confirms the importance of Columbia Basin salmon to meeting the whales’ year-round nutritional needs as these whales spend months every year along the Washington Coast and at or near the mouth of the Columbia River.

The plight of Southern Resident orcas has grown steadily more urgent in the past two decades. Their population has declined from 98 whales in 1995 to just 76 in 2018. They were classified as “endangered” under the federal Endangered Species Act in 2005. Despite

this listing, however, their overall numbers have continued to decline. They will not likely recover unless salmon populations rebound.

The Southern Residents rely heavily on Chinook salmon throughout the year. As a result, the steep declines in salmon populations originating in the Fraser and Columbia/Snake Rivers and other coastal river systems have caused significant nutritional stress, increasing mortality in the population and reducing their reproductive success. A scientific paper published in June 2017 determined that nearly 70 percent of pregnancies are spontaneously miscarried during mid and late stages of pregnancy; indeed this community of orcas has not had a surviving calf since 2015.

In 2015, the National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration included the Southern Resident orcas as a “Species in the Spotlight” - one of eight critically endangered marine species that are highly likely to go extinct without immediate, meaningful action to avoid it.

<http://www.noaanews.noaa.gov/stories2015/20150514-species-in-the-spotlight-campaign-brings-new-focus-to-noaa-fisheries-endangered-species-conservation-efforts.html>

In 2017, the Puget Sound Partnership passed its only resolution of the year to highlight the urgent need to accelerate salmon restoration activities in the Salish Sea and other river systems, including the Columbia/Snake, in order to better meet the nutritional needs of hungry Southern Resident orcas.

<http://www.wildsalmon.org/images/factsheets-and-reports/2017.PSP.orca.resolution.Nov1.pdf>

The ***Orca Salmon Alliance*** was founded in 2015 to prevent the extinction of the Southern Resident orcas by recovering the wild Chinook populations upon which the whales depend for their survival. OSA members include *Orca Network, Defenders of Wildlife, Save Our Wild Salmon, Washington Environmental Council, Oceana, Natural Resources Defense Council, Sierra Club, Earthjustice, Endangered Species Coalition, Whale and Dolphin Conservation, Puget Soundkeeper, Center for Biological Diversity, Seattle Aquarium and Whale Scout.*

www.orcasalmonalliance.org