

For Immediate Release:

Orca Recovery Task Force calls for urgent action to increase Columbia-Snake river chinook salmon populations, among its recommendations for Governor Inslee to protect critically endangered orcas from extinction.

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Governor Inslee's Task Force delivers two recommendations affecting the federal hydro-system to increase chinook salmon for Southern Resident orcas: increased 'spill' and a planning forum to prepare for the potential removal of the lower Snake River dams.

Seattle WA - After months of discussion and deliberation, the Southern Resident Orca Recovery Task Force released its 2018 recommendations for Governor Inslee today at the Seattle Aquarium.

The 36 recommendations represent an initial set of actions to protect critically endangered Southern Resident orcas from extinction. The recommendations address three primary threats to orca survival: lack of prey (mainly Chinook salmon), vessel interference, and contamination. They take a regional approach – focusing on policies and actions in the Columbia-Snake and the Salish Sea Basins. Southern Resident orcas split their time between the Salish Sea and the coastal waters of the west coast hunting for prey. 80% of their diet is composed of Chinook salmon, another Northwest species suffering deep population declines.

Joseph Bogaard, Save Our wild Salmon Coalition: “Fundamentally, endangered orcas urgently need more salmon. We appreciate this initial set of recommendations from the Task Force. But now all eyes are on the Governor

and the legislature; they need to move quickly to fully fund and implement these actions. We're are playing catch up today, and there is no time to waste.”

Two specific recommendations call on Governor Inslee to reduce the high salmon mortality caused by the Columbia-Snake River Basin dams and their reservoirs. One recommendation calls on the Department of Ecology to modify its water quality standards in order to allow for increased ‘spill’ at the eight federal dams on the lower Snake and lower Columbia rivers. Scientific research demonstrates that increased spill (water sent over the dams rather than through turbines) delivers juvenile salmon more quickly and safely to the Pacific Ocean and results in higher adult returns in the years that follow.

A second recommendation asks Governor Inslee to convene a forum that brings together affected communities to identify issues and potential solutions in the event that the four lower Snake dams will be removed. Federal agencies today are examining dam removal and other salmon protection alternatives under the direction of a federal court. Their analyses and recommendation, conducted under the National Environmental Policy Act, is expected in 2020 or 2021.

Bill Arthur, Sierra Club: “The science is clear and the public strongly supports increased spill at the federal dams on the Columbia & Snake Rivers and removal of the lower Snake River dams; these are essential actions to rebuild salmon populations in the near and long-term. With its recommendations, the Orca Task Force has called for urgent action in the Columbia Basin. We call on Governor Inslee to prioritize these actions.”

The science strongly supports increasing spill and restoring the lower Snake River to substantially rebuild Chinook salmon populations. Thirty-three salmon biologists and six orca scientists sent two separate letters to the Task Force in recent months. Together, the letters emphasize the necessity and opportunity for restoring the Columbia Basin Chinook salmon to meet the needs of starving Southern Resident orcas. Both letters highlight the benefits of increased spill and a freely flowing lower Snake River to recover endangered salmon populations.

Conservationists and fishing advocates have long called for the various interests impacted by the dams to sit down together to discuss concerns and develop a dam removal transition plan that meets the needs of all communities. With the potential extinction of both orca and salmon on the table today, it is essential that these discussions between Tribes, fishermen and farmers, and other affected communities begin immediately.

Restoring the lower Snake River would re-connect endangered salmon and steelhead populations to more than 5,000 river and stream miles of protected, high-quality habitat in southeast Washington State, central Idaho and northeast Oregon. Removing these four federal dams been identified by scientists as our best opportunity anywhere on the West Coast to re-build the chinook populations that the orca need. Growing numbers of people also see removal of these dams and their high costs as an opportunity for Bonneville Power Administration to reduce its liabilities and focus its limited resources to repair and maintain far more valuable hydro projects on the mainstem Columbia River.

BACKGROUND: Governor Inslee established the Orca Recovery Task Force by executive order in March 2018 to develop a plan for long-term orca recovery and population sustainability. The task force includes more than forty representatives of Tribes, state and federal agencies, scientists, stakeholders and advocates. Further information about the Task Force can be found here: <https://www.governor.wa.gov/issues/issues/energy-environment/southern-resident-killer-whale-recovery-and-task-force>

An iconic species to the Pacific Northwest, the Southern Resident killer whales' habitat ranges from southeastern Alaska to central California. There are three main pods of Southern Resident killer whales; the J, K, and L pod. Each pod has their own unique characteristics, including home range and dialect. These whales were listed under the Endangered Species Act in 2005; just 74 individuals survive today. Of these, 27 are potentially reproducing females. The Southern Residents have not successfully produced offspring in nearly four years.