

US must consider how salmon fishing hurts West Coast orcas

By Gene Johnson

Associated Press

SEATTLE — The federal government is violating the Endangered Species Act by failing to consider how salmon fishing off the West Coast is affecting endangered killer whales, two conservation groups said Tuesday as they threatened a lawsuit.

The Arizona-based Center for Biological Diversity and the Washington state-based Wild Fish Conservancy notified President Donald Trump's administration they intend to file a lawsuit within 60 days unless officials reevaluate whether the fishing further jeopardizes orcas that frequent the inland waters of the Pacific Northwest.

"We can't allow business as usual in the salmon fisheries while southern resident killer whales are starving to death," Julie Teel Simmonds, an attorney with the Center for Biological Diversity, said in a news release.

The plight of the southern resident population has received much attention

this year as scientists warn that they're on the brink of extinction. There are just 74 left in the Pacific Northwest, the lowest number since more than 50 were captured for aquarium display in the 1970s, and no calf born in the last three years has survived. One mother whale captured attention around the world this summer when she carried her dead calf on her head for 17 days in an apparent attempt to revive it.

Last week, Washington Gov. Jay Inslee announced what he called a "herculean" \$1.1 billion plan to help the population recover.

The Democrat said the money would go toward protecting and restoring habitat for salmon, especially chinook, the orcas' favored prey; boosting production from salmon hatcheries; storm-water cleanup; and quieting vessel traffic, which can interfere with the whales' hunting and communication.

But conservationists say more must be done. While a federal judge has ordered the government to consider

boosting salmon runs by breaching four dams on the Lower Snake River, that prospect remains highly controversial and Republicans in Congress have vowed to oppose it.

Unlike other populations of orcas, which feed on marine mammals including seals, the southern residents eat salmon — primarily chinook. The conservation groups said Tuesday that one way to help them immediately would be to catch fewer salmon off the coast, where the whales spend their winters.

For now, the groups are not targeting fishing in Washington state's inland waters, including Puget Sound, where fishing quotas are managed under a different process.

According to a letter the groups sent to the U.S. Commerce Department and the National Marine Fisheries Service, the federal government has been relying on an outdated 2009 review to authorize salmon fisheries up and down the West Coast.

At the time of the 2009



Courtesy Photo

Conservation groups say the federal government is violating the Endangered Species Act by failing to consider how salmon fishing is affecting endangered killer whales.

review, there were 85 orcas in the southern resident population.

Michael Milstein, a spokesman for the fisheries service, said it did not have any immediate comment.

The letter noted that more than 200,000 chinook were caught by recreational and commercial boats off the coasts of Washington, Oregon and California last year, which researchers

estimate as equaling as much as one-quarter of all chinook available.

"There is now significant new information not only about the alarming population decline of the Southern Resident killer whales, but also about the relationship between Chinook and the orcas' reproductive success and viability," the letter said.

The Center for Biological

Diversity sued to get the southern resident orcas listed as endangered in 2005 and filed two other recent lawsuits against the government — one to expand habitat protections to the orcas' foraging and migration areas off the West Coast, and another to establish a "whale protection zone" to shield orcas from boat noise and disturbance in the Puget Sound.

LOCAL BRIEFING

From staff reports

Free tai chi class on hiatus for the holidays

LA GRANDE — The Tai Chi: Moving for Better Balance class at the Presbyterian Friendship Center in La Grande will conclude the current session Dec. 20. The next session will begin Jan. 8, 2019. The free 9 a.m. class is open to all ages, and instruction is provided.

Visit with Santa this weekend in Union

UNION — All children and their families are welcome to visit with Santa this weekend

at the Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 4060 in Union. The jolly man will be available for photos between 3 p.m. and 6 p.m. Dec. 21, 22 and 23 at the VFW Hall, 518 N. Main St. Call 541-562-6035 for more information.

Interested in serving on Cove Budget Committee?

COVE — The City of Cove is seeking citizens to serve on its Budget Committee. Anyone interested in this opportunity is asked to stop by Cove City Hall, 504 Alder, or

call 541 568-4566.

City of La Grande seeks members for advisory commissions

LA GRANDE — The La Grande City Council is recruiting members for its advisory commissions. There are openings on these commissions: Air Quality; Arts; Budget; Building Board of Appeals; Community Landscape and Forestry; Landmarks; Parking, Traffic Safety and Street Maintenance; Parks and Recreation; Planning; and

Urban Renewal.

More information regarding the advisory commissions and the application form may be found at www.cityoflagrade.org, by calling 541-962-1309, or obtained from Stacey Stockhoff, assistant to the city manager, or City Recorder Kayla Nichols on the second floor of La Grande City Hall, 1000 Adams Ave. Completed applications should be returned to Ms. Stockhoff or Ms. Nichols by noon Dec. 26 for consideration during the city council's regular session

in January 2019.

Wallowa County Christmas Bird Count happens Dec. 23

ENTERPRISE — The 43rd annual Wallowa County Christmas Bird Count is set for Dec. 23. Participants will meet at 7 a.m. at the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife Conference

Room at 65495 Alder Slope Road by the Fish Hatchery near Enterprise.

The group will reconvene at noon at the El Bajio Mexican restaurant, 100 W. North St., Enterprise, for lunch and to collect count datasheets. For more information, contact Mike Hansen at 541-398-8225 or mhansen@frontier.com.



Cherise Kaechele/The Observer

La Grande Fire, La Grande Rural, Imbler and Cove fire departments responded to a structure fire on Monday night at the La Grande Inn behind Denny's. The fire was in the unoccupied portion of their property and the investigator for the State Fire Marshal has classified the fire as "suspicious, but undetermined," according to La Grande Fire Chief Les Thomas. The investigation will likely end there because there were no witnesses and there are no more leads. Thomas said there were visible flames when crews arrived, which was located in two hotel rooms and two utility rooms. This building is separated from the occupied portion of the hotel by a small roadway big enough to drive through.

PUBLIC SAFETY REPORT

LA GRANDE POLICE DEPARTMENT

Arrested: Jordan William Wilson, 19, unknown address, was arrested on a Union County warrant charging failure to appear in court on a charge of third-degree theft.

Arrested: Jorge Alejandro Fuentes Carrasquillo, 26, unknown address, was arrested on charges of unlawful use of a weapon and second-degree criminal mischief.

Accident: Nobody was injured in a traffic accident Monday at Cove Avenue and 27th Street. The accident was reported at 10:07 a.m.

Accident: Nobody was injured in a traffic accident at Washington Avenue and Depot Street on Monday. The accident was reported at 11:27 a.m.

Arrested: Christopher Lee Cox, 34, unknown address, was arrested on a parole and probation detainer.

Arrested: Kirk Ray Pickens, 50, Perry, was arrested on a Oregon State Parole Board warrant charging a parole violation. The alleged parole violation was connected to an original charge of dangerous drugs.

LA GRANDE FIRE DEPARTMENT

La Grande Fire Department responded to five calls for medical, two engine calls and one structure fire on Monday and four calls for medical and one fire alarm on Tuesday.

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Public Safety Report

The Public Safety Report is compiled from police blotter information supplied by local law enforcement agencies and fire department reports.

OBITUARIES

Ruth M. Tuski

Enterprise

Ruth M. Tuski, 87, of Enterprise and formerly of La Grande, died Dec. 17 at a local care facility. An obituary is forthcoming. Loveland Funeral Chapel & Crematory will be handling the arrangements.

Christina M. Bunch

La Grande

Christina Marie Bunch, 45, of La Grande, died

Dec. 18 at her home. An obituary is forthcoming. Loveland Funeral Chapel & Crematory will be handling the arrangements.

Robert Jellum

La Grande

Robert Jellum, 82, of La Grande, died Dec. 18 at a local care facility. An obituary is forthcoming. Loveland Funeral Chapel & Crematory will be handling the arrangements.

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- Served four years as flight surgeon, Langley Air Force Base, Virginia and Shaw Air Force Base, South Carolina

Dr. Heisinger will be seeing patients at Wallowa Memorial Hospital regularly for clinic visits and surgery. Ask your physician for a referral today.



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