

Groups want US to consider salmon fishing impact on 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 re-evaluate 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 orcas' plight has received much attention this year as scientists warn that they're on the brink of extinction. There are just 74 left, 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.



AP Photo/Elaine Thompson

An endangered female orca leaps from the water while breaching in Puget Sound west of Seattle.

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; stormwater 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. Department of Commerce 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 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 state, 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 Puget Sound.

Wyden calls for 911-like suicide prevention number

By KRISTIAN FODEN-VENCIL
Oregon Public Broadcasting

U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden has asked the Federal Communications Commission to create a three-digit phone number for those thinking about taking their lives or in need of mental health support.

In a recent study by Mental Health America, Oregon ranked behind nearly every other state in the nation because of its prevalence of mental illness and lack of access to care.

There is a national suicide prevention number, 1-800-273-TALK, but it doesn't exactly trip off the tongue.

Wyden said a three-digit code, along the lines of 911, would solve that problem.

"More needs to be done to help those in need, and to increase resources and improve access to mental health professionals to help those thinking of suicide," the Oregon Democrat wrote the FCC. "I believe

that a three-digit code number, similar to 911 for emergencies, would most easily come to mind for those in need of intervention services."

The FCC confirmed that the agency had received Wyden's letter, and was reviewing it.

Oregon based Lines For Life is recommending 611 as the number. CEO Dwight Holton said it's time to make it easier for people in crisis to access support.

"We all know that for fire or rescue or physical injury, we call 911. Well, we need a 911 for the brain — and that's what a three-digit lifeline will deliver," Holton said.

If the number were to change, it would likely be staffed by the current national suicide prevention hotline. That hotline fields about 2 million calls a year.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports more than 40,000 Americans die each year from suicide.



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