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What's that out on the water? A drone?

Drones don't always fly. Two wind- and solar-powered sailing drones are prowling West Coast ocean waters in hopes of improving the accuracy of fish surveys.

It's a joint project of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Fisheries and Oceans Canada, and Saildrone Inc., a private company based in Alameda, Calif.

The entities launched two Saildrones from Neah Bay, Wash., at the end of June

They headed to the northern end of Vancouver Island, turned south and are following a series of transects along the coast south to San Francisco.

Two additional Saildrones joined the project fleet in early July going from Alameda to the Southern California.

They will gather acoustic data on Pacific hake (whiting) and pelagic species such as sardines, anchovy and mackerel, which make up many of the West Coast's most important commercial fisheries.

The hake fishery is jointly



Courtesy NOAA Fisheries
A sailing drone is launched from Neah Bay, Wash., on June 26.

managed by Canada and the United States.

Fishermen unloaded 558 million pounds of hake worth about \$47 million in Astoria, Westport, Wash., and a few other ports in 2016.

The NOAA ship "Reuben Lasker" also is in the region gathering similar acoustic data for comparison.

The Lasker is equipped with advanced echosounders for accurately surveying fish populations.

"This partnership is putting

To learn more

Progress of the West Coast sail drones can be found on a blog at the NOAA website (do a Google search for NOAA Sail-drone).

some of the most important new marine technology to work for the West Coast," said Toby Garfield, acting deputy director of NOAA's Southwest Fisheries Science Center in La Jolla, Calif., and part of the team directing the fifth Saildrone.

"The more complete and accurate data we have, the better decisions our fisheries managers can make in real terms of catch levels and seasons," Garfield said.

Sailing drones have been used in Alaska to compile data on endangered whales, information on walleye pollock and surveys of declining populations of northern fur seals.

This year, the focus in Alaska is on studying abundance and distribution of Arctic cod in the Chukchi Sea.

Mayor leads citywide volksmarch

Those wanting to walk the many trails and stairways connecting Astoria's streets will find the perfect outing Saturday, July 21.

Angora Hiking Club has organized a group walk during the citywide volksmarch, a noncompetitive organized walk of several miles.

The walk takes participants from Astor Street to Niagara Street and back again using several trails and stairways between the streets.

Register at Pier 11. It's free for those not walking for credit, but donations are accepted.

Angora club member Arline LaMear, who also is

Astoria's mayor, will lead those ready to walk at 9 a.m. Those wanting to walk on their own can register and pick up directions anytime between 9 a.m. and noon.

The club also will hike the Fort to Sea/South Slough Loop on Wednesday, July 25.

All interested hikers should meet at 1 p.m. at Sixth Street and Marine Drive in Astoria as parking is extremely limited at the site.

The hike is more than 2 miles through lush forest with plenty of ripe blackberries. For more information, call hike leader Marlene Colendich at 503-325-8208.

St. Francis has annual picnic

St. Francis de Sales Mission Catholic Church has its annual picnic Sunday, July 29, after 11 a.m. Mass.

Knights of Columbus is providing hamburgers and hotdogs. Participants are asked to bring their favorite dish to share plus drinks.

Games are planned after the potluck. All families are welcome.

The usual Vigil Mass scheduled for 4 p.m. Saturday, July 28, has been cancelled.

The church is at 867 Fifth St., Hammond.