

Focus on: Saving the Southern Resident Orca



Southern resident orcas visit the Salish Sea from late spring through the fall. Photo: Washington Department of Natural Resources.

Southern Resident Orca Task Force

Executive Order 18-02 established a task force to develop long-term recommendations for Southern Resident orca recovery and future sustainability. In November 2018, the task force released a final comprehensive report and recommendations. The report details potential options to address the major threats to Southern Resident orcas, including prey availability, toxic contaminants, and disturbance from noise and vessel traffic.

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Special Accommodations

To request ADA accommodation, call Washington Relay Service at 711. People with speech disability may call TTY at 877-833-6341.

Governor Inslee proposes funding package to support orca recovery efforts.

The Pacific Northwest's Southern Resident orcas are struggling to survive. More than a century of development and human activity along Puget Sound and the effects of climate change are largely the cause. Despite protections and recovery efforts over the past few decades, the Southern Resident orca population fell to 74 in 2018; the lowest number in more than 30 years. We need to make significant investments and efforts to prevent Southern Resident orcas from falling closer to extinction.

The governor's 2019-21 budgets have made Southern Resident orca recovery a top priority. Capital, operating, and transportation budget investments of nearly \$1.1 billion will move the region toward a thriving and resilient orca population.

These investments will also benefit the region's entire ecosystem and complement efforts to recover salmon, address climate change, and improve water quality. The actions that these budgets invest in are the most likely to benefit the Southern Resident orcas in the short term and develop a sustainable, data-driven path forward in the long term.

Ecology's role in Southern Resident orca recovery

Ecology works to improve and protect water quality, water quantity, fish habitat, and reduce toxic contaminants. Many of our long-standing programs help address these issues, and Governor Inslee's 2019-21 budget package includes over \$26 million in operating and, \$300 million in capital investments for Ecology's role in Southern Resident orca recovery. Specifically, we will use these funds to address lack of prey, toxic contaminants, and vessel traffic issues.

Lack of prey

Southern Resident orcas prey primarily on Chinook salmon. Naturally spawning and young hatchery salmon need productive and protected habitat to thrive. Fully functioning salmon habitat includes uplands and riparian habitat, as well as cool, clear water. Governor Inslee's budget provides over \$173 million in operating and capital investments for Ecology activities that will help address lack of prey for Southern Resident orcas. Examples of these investments include:

- Continue implementing the Streamflow Restoration Program, created during the 2018 legislative session, to improve instream flows statewide for additional water supplies that will improve conditions for fish and wildlife.
- Conduct rulemaking to enable a higher volume of water spilled over Columbia River and Snake River dams to help cool the water to benefit Chinook salmon and other salmonids. To increase the spill, we will need to increase total dissolved gas allowance standards.
- Invest in both the Nonpoint and Point Source Pollution Programs to help us work with landowners, local governments, and industry to promote voluntary compliance, implement best management practices, and support the completion of water quality cleanup plans.
- Use Floodplains by Design as an integrated approach that combines flood-hazard reduction actions with salmon recovery, river and habitat restoration, and other public benefits.
- Continue investment in the Yakima River Basin Integrated Water Resources Management Plan to provide a comprehensive, long-term water resources and habitat improvement program that supports basin aquatic resources, fish and wildlife habitat, dry-year irrigation, and municipal water supplies.

Toxic contaminants

Toxic contaminants in water and sediments are harmful to the marine food web that supports Southern Resident orcas. These toxics not only reduce salmon and other forage fish survival, they also are absorbed by orcas, which can disrupt reproduction and suppress their immune system. The governor's budget invests over \$152 million in operating and capital funding for Ecology to prevent and clean up toxic contaminants that impact Southern Resident orcas. Examples of these investments include:

- Use Ecology's water quality combined funding program (Stormwater Financial Assistance Grants, Centennial Clean Water Grants, and Water Pollution Control Revolving Program (SRF) loans) to provide grants and loans to local public entities to finance projects that treat polluted stormwater and wastewater in priority areas throughout Washington. This work helps reduce toxics and other pollution from entering our waterways and protects our marine waters, estuaries, lakes, rivers, and groundwater resources.
- The local source control program will expand to help address stormwater permit hotspots that impact Puget Sound and focus on removing sources of toxics in Puget Sound that impact orcas.
- Chemical Action Plans (CAPs) will be developed, implemented, monitored, and accelerated to identify uses, releases, and sources of exposure to persistent, bioaccumulative, and toxic chemicals, and recommend steps to reduce and eliminate future releases into the environment.
- For more than ten years, Ecology has been identifying and cleaning up contaminated sites in the Puget Sound Basin. This work has highlighted a valuable link between toxic site cleanup and habitat restoration. The governor's budget provides funding for projects that integrate shoreline habitat restoration opportunities with cleanup projects to protect public and environmental health.

Vessel traffic

Oil spills are a low-probability but high-impact risk to Southern Resident orcas. To reduce the risk of a catastrophic oil spill, the governor's budget provides funding for Ecology to work with the Board of Pilotage Commissioners as it engages in rule-making and modeling that would require tug escorts for oil tank vessels over 5,000 dead weight tons, but less than 40,000 dead weight tons, transporting oil through high-risk areas of Puget Sound.