

Whale Watching Experts Assist with Wildlife Oil Spill Response Efforts



Photo courtesy of L. Leddy

Contact information

Spills Program
360-407-7455

ecology.wa.gov/SpillsProgram

ADA Accessibility

To request an ADA accommodation, contact Ecology by phone at 360-407-7211 or email at

ecyadacoordinator@ecy.wa.gov, or visit

<https://ecology.wa.gov/accessibility>. For Relay Service or TTY call 711 or 877-833-6341.



Does this idea interest you?

Are you a skilled vessel operator with expert knowledge of our local waters? Do you have experience responsibly maneuvering vessels within safe distances of whales? Do you have a desire to help protect our state's whale populations in the event of an oil spill? If you answered yes to these questions, we are interested in your support for a statewide initiative.

We are seeking vessel operators who would like to register their vessels and crew expertise in our [Vessel of Opportunity \(VOO\) Program](#). Vessel operators could be trained to conduct wildlife surveillance and deterrence in the event of an oil spill. Vessels used during a response can expect to be compensated by the spiller for the work conducted.

Background Information

Washington is an oil refining state with large volumes of oil being transported by vessels, railroads, facilities and pipelines. Because the risk of an oil spill exists, special planning and preparedness is essential to reduce potential impacts to land, water, wildlife, and the state's economy.

Of special concern in the Pacific Northwest is the Southern Resident Killer Whale population. A large oil spill could be devastating to this already vulnerable species. Currently, the most viable option to minimize the impact to whales from a major oil spill is to monitor for their presence, and deter them away from the oiled waters. To conduct such operations requires multi-agency coordination, as well as trained and equipped vessel operators.



How to register to be a VOO:

Washington maintains a volunteer registration system for oil spill response.

- Log on to: www.oilspills101.wa.gov
- Click “Vessel of Opportunity” on the title menu
- Next, click the highlighted “Click here” in STEP 1
- Scroll down & fill out all pertinent fields: be sure to check “vessel of opportunity” under the “Register as” & “Subscribe to” headings.
- Then click the “Submit” button – It’s that easy!

Once you have submitted a registration, the system will reply with a “thank you” and explain we will be contacting you shortly for a follow up.

If you prefer to register over the phone, please contact Shawn Zaniwski at (360) 951-1668 or shawn.zaniwski@ecy.wa.gov.

The Governor’s Executive Order

In 2018, Governor Inslee signed Executive Order 18-021, directing state agencies to take several immediate actions to benefit Southern Resident Killer Whales. One of these actions was to develop a curriculum for the possible use of the whale watching industry during an oil spill. This curriculum was completed in April of 2018 and can be found [here](#).

Government agencies involved in this project include NOAA’s National Marine Fisheries Service, the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, and Washington Department of Ecology. Working closely with the Pacific Whale Watch Association, we hope to build a robust fleet of vessels and operators that could play vital roles in an oil spill in our state’s waters.



What is a Vessel of Opportunity (VOO)?

In the oil spill response world, a VOO is a vessel (recreational or commercial) that, once registered, may be asked to assist in a response if they are available at the time. VOOs support and supplement the dedicated fleet of full time oil spill response vessels. We will need both in the event of a large oil spill.

The VOOs would be vetted once registered, and volunteers would be trained prior to responding. Training would include how to safely work under an emergency response plan, how to use deterrence equipment, and how to coordinate deterrence tactics.

