

Southern Resident orcas listed as endangered

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The Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission recently voted unanimously to list Southern Resident orcas as endangered under Oregon's Endangered Species Act (OESA).

Southern Resident orcas now number just 75 whales in three pods and have been listed as endangered under federal law since 2005. Their reproductive potential is in danger of failure due to their small population size, inbreeding, and other reproductive issues.

Scarcity of prey (especially chinook salmon, their preferred food), sound and vessel disturbance and exposure to high levels of contaminants are the primary reasons for their decline, according to a press release issued by the Fish and Wildlife Commission.

The Oregon coast is an important travel corridor for Southern Resident orcas in the K and L pods with the area near the Columbia River mouth serving as a foraging hot spot. Oregon's coastal waters (6-200 m depth) were federally designated as critical habitat in 2021.

The commission also adopted survival guidelines for Southern Resident orcas. These are required under OESA and apply to actions proposed on state lands or waters and help guide state agencies that play a role in conservation until the Commission approves a management plan for these agencies.

Guidelines adopted direct relevant state agencies to further monitor and address pollutants, especially those posing the highest risk for Southern Resident orcas and their prey; increase boater education on the current federal vessel buffer guidelines to reduce vessel and noise disturbance; enhance hatchery chinook salmon production if capacity and funding exists; and increase efforts to prevent oil and other hazardous material spills.