

Governor's Southern Resident Orca Task Force Recommendations

FAQ on Prey

1. What are the most important orca budget and policy priorities that you are putting forward? Are these actions bold enough to recover orcas?

What's most important about my budget and policy priorities is that I am focusing on both immediate actions to turn around the decline of our orcas and longer term actions that will sustain our orcas for the future. These actions are targeted towards all major threats facing Southern resident orcas (lack of prey, vessel noise and disturbance, and contaminants) and the overarching threat to our marine environment and us, climate change. These actions come together and can make a powerful difference for our orcas and our future. What is bold is the suite of actions taken as a package with significant investments and policies for orcas. Bold will be measured by how strongly supported the entire package is and therefore what we can get done for our orcas.

2. There doesn't seem to be any actions that will immediately make more salmon for orcas? Why?

Unfortunately, there is little we can do to instantly create more adult salmon for the orcas. However, several of the actions I am prioritizing, like restoring fish passage, reducing predation near Bonneville dam, and investing in hatchery production, will help us to see more Chinook and other salmon for orcas in the next 3-5 years. Other actions, like our investments in salmon habitat restoration do not have immediate benefits but are required to make all other investments sustainable and durable into the future. In the meantime, while we are working on getting more salmon to the orcas, we are also working to make sure that the orcas can get to the salmon that are out there by reducing vessel noise and disturbance.

3. Why didn't the Task Force or you call for the immediate breaching of the four lower Snake River dams?

After hearing strong public opinion and several varying technical reports, the Task Force concluded this issue is very complex biologically, economically and socially. The Task Force has recommended that the most prudent path forward is convening a neutrally-facilitated, stakeholder engagement process to identify and resolve the uncertainties, risks, costs, and to explore potential mitigation for affected communities if the dams were breached or removed. The stakeholder process would complement the ongoing federal Columbia River System Operations EIS process, where dam removal is currently being considered as a potential alternative.

4. Why are you funding and prioritizing increased hatchery production? Isn't this bad for wild salmon?

One of the most immediate ways to increase salmon abundance is to produce them in hatcheries. These increases in the near term, within the next 3-5 years are important while we work on other actions that are promoting the recovery and increases in abundances of our

natural stocks of salmon. Increased hatchery production will be done using the best science available and in ways that limit impacts to wild/natural salmon stocks.

5. Why the strong emphasis on regulatory protections and restoring salmon habitat and not just produce more salmon in hatcheries?

Productive and protected habitat is critical to support sustainable populations of both young naturally spawning and hatchery salmon. The strategy to recover Orca is to protect our watersheds, restore habitat and incentivize landowners to do good things on their land for natural salmon production while we use hatcheries judiciously as an interim strategy. Orcas need a stable abundance of salmon available throughout the year, including sustainable, natural-origin salmon populations like those that they evolved with over eons of time. We need to ensure that appropriate policies are in place and funding available for our state agencies to better work with landowners and local governments for salmon habitat protection and restoration. We need to protect the habitat that we have and restore the habitat we can: for our Orcas, our salmon, and our grandkids.

6. What will be done around salmon predators like seals and sea lions?

The recovery of seals and sea lions (pinnipeds) on the west coast is a great conservation success, but they, along with other predators such as fish and birds, impact the abundance of Chinook and other salmon that Southern Resident Orcas eat. Pinniped predation is especially a problem at “pinch points” such as dams or other man-made structures where salmon congregate. We are investing heavily in increasing management actions in the Columbia River to protect endangered salmon and Orcas, and we are working to collect information on pinniped populations and diet in Puget Sound to better understand their impacts and how best to address them.

7. Q: Why are resources going to forage fish and zooplankton? Shouldn't we be more focused on salmon and things the Orcas need?

Zooplankton and forage fish are key ingredients necessary for a healthy marine food web and therefore healthy salmon and Orcas. Healthy marine forage fish like anchovies, smelt, and herring and salmon populations need zooplankton prey and forage fish are an important food source for salmon. In addition, forage fish also feed predators like seals. When forage fish are abundant, predators can focus on food other than young salmon.

Forage fish require soft, natural, unaltered shoreline habitat and beaches for spawning. Unfortunately, many of us like to live near the beach and many of us have protected our property by armoring the shoreline with methods like bulkheads. We need to protect our natural shorelines and restore them where we can to ensure healthy forage fish populations, salmon populations and ultimately Orcas.

We know that climate change, through ocean acidification and warming oceans, can also greatly affect zooplankton and forage fish, which are the base of our food web. We need to not only monitor the changes that are occurring in our food web, but do everything we can to stop contributing to climate change.

8. Why didn't you shut down harvest of Chinook to benefit orcas?

Harvesting Chinook reduces the number of fish in our waters, which is why I fully support the reductions that are laid out in the latest Pacific Salmon Treaty, which will help to limit the number of Chinook taken not just here in Washington but also by our neighbors. In addition, we have reduced commercial and recreational salmon catches steadily in Washington's marine and freshwater areas since the early 1970s. We manage fisheries in Washington with the best available science and work with our federal and tribal partners to ensure harvest levels and methods won't impact the ability for our southern resident orcas to be successful. We will continue to evaluate any additional actions that might be needed in relation to harvest to respond to the orcas' critical need.