

Statement of the Columbia River Tribes Regarding Recommendations of the  
Southern Resident Killer Whale Work Group  
Pacific Fisheries Management Council  
September 17, 2020

The member tribes of the Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission (Nez Perce, Umatilla, Warm Springs, Yakama) support the recommendations of the Southern Resident Killer Whale Work Group and encourage the PFMC to send the recommendations out for public review. Our understanding is the PFMC will consider adopting measures at the November meeting.

The capture of SRKW for use in aquaria in the 1960s significantly diminished the population. The population continued along at smaller numbers before decreasing to the current population size of around 72 animals. The SRKW faces a number of challenges to restoration.

The factors most commonly identified with SRKW population decline are prey abundance, noise pollution, and water quality. All of these factors need to share the burden of conservation and must be addressed to facilitate improvement in the SRKW population. We understand that PFMC can only directly address the prey abundance, but the region can not lose sight of the other factors, if SRKW population restoration is to be achieved.

The Columbia River Tribes support the idea of a chinook salmon abundance threshold as a danger signal for the health of the SRKW population. The SRKW Work Group has offered several alternatives which should be sent out for public review. The concept of a two-year geometric mean has some merit, given that these animals are long lived and have a lengthy gestation period.

The low abundance of chinook is concern, not only for the SRKW, but for the fishermen that depend on them for commercial, ceremonial, and subsistence needs. Actions need to be taken to increase the production (numbers) and productivity (survival rate) of chinook salmon. Producing additional hatchery helps increase the numbers in the immediate future. However, actions to increase the survival of existing natural and hatchery production. Improving hatchery facilities will increase survival of hatchery fish. The actions to increase chinook production are largely outside the scope of PFMC but are within the scope of many of the agencies represented on PFMC. It is not enough to simply reduce harvest in PFMC fisheries to address decreased chinook abundance. The region must work together to increase chinook abundance for the health of the SRKW population and the health of fisheries.

The recommendations of the SRKW Work Group include fishery modifications when the chinook abundance is below the threshold. Fisheries are already reduced when chinook abundance is low. Additional measures might include adjustments in the time and area of fisheries to minimize interactions between fisheries and SRKW population. It will be challenging to identify the adjustments to fisheries that will significantly benefit the SRKW population.

The Columbia River Tribes look forward to continued discussions on actions that will produce benefits to chinook abundance, the SRKW population, and fisheries.

Thank you.