

SALMON ADVISORY SUBPANEL REPORT ON
SOUTHERN RESIDENT KILLER WHALE ENDANGERED SPECIES ACT
CONSULTATION

The Salmon Advisory Subpanel (SAS) was provided an overview of the Southern Resident Killer Whale (SRKW) Workgroup report from the Workgroup's co-chair Jeromy Jording. The SAS appreciates the Workgroup's hard work and time spent on first developing a risk assessment and now a range of alternatives for Council consideration. Members of the SAS attended the last Workgroup meeting in August, but have had little time to contemplate the alternatives provided in the report as a whole.

The SAS understands that SRKWs are affected by multiple environmental pressures, with availability of prey being one of those factors. Although noise pollution and toxins in the water are also major factors affecting the whales, the Workgroup was tasked with just looking at the effects of the Council-area fishery on Chinook abundance, the primary prey of SRKWs. The SAS feels strongly that increased production of salmon at Federal, State, and Tribal facilities is the most dependable tool available to increase the prey base for the whales.

Following lengthy discussion, the SAS recommends the adoption of Alternative 3.1.1: No Action – Status Quo Fishery Management Plan implementation. The SAS agrees with the Workgroup report outlining the weak stock management requirements already imbedded in the directed fishery harvest process and would note the uncertainties of the other alternatives in providing benefit to the whales. While there are uncertainties about the outcomes of implementing the other Alternatives, there is no uncertainty as to the impact of those actions on fishermen and coastal communities. Reduced opportunities, shortened seasons, and severe financial impacts will have very real consequences for the industry with only speculative benefit for the SRKW population. Eliminating fishing in April and May removes the most lucrative fishing period and the strongest markets for troll-caught Chinook salmon. The SAS feels that is an unnecessary burden to place on the fishing community.

Should the Council consider an action alternative rather than status quo, the SAS recommends adoption of Alternative 3.1.2.a (threshold based on the year with the lowest modeled abundance (1994); result: 813,000 adult Chinook salmon). The SAS notes the commentary from the Workgroup about the lack of significant relationships between salmon abundance and SRKW demographics in the Risk Assessment. If any of the alternatives are chosen under Section 3.1.2, the SAS feels the least restrictive is warranted until more contemporary data are collected.

The SAS also discussed the potential list of responses outlined in Alternative 3.1.2.e. The SAS recognizes that every year is different, and that flexibility will be critical. Structuring fisheries to balance meaningful fishing opportunity while allowing for sufficient Chinook prey abundance for SRKWs will be key. The SAS agreed that if a threshold is triggered, then the appropriate response should be determined by the Council at the time, and not an automatic, or prescribed, response. This flexibility would help in providing a proportional response to the level of the threshold shortfall.

Some additional comments from the SAS:

- Increasing survival of naturally-produced and hatchery-stocked Chinook is key to increasing the prey base available for SRKW. Broadening programs to reduce pinniped and avian predation on smolts and adults is warranted if the total impact of finding solutions is not limited to just the fishing community.
- Fixed solutions, at this time, are not realistic until more information about the distribution of whales and salmon is developed.

Further SAS comments:

- The SAS supports the comments provided in the Joint Tribal report at the June 2020 Council meeting (Agenda Item E.2.a, June 2020).
- The SAS appreciates the statement in Supplemental NMFS Report 1 under this agenda item that describes their continued effort to consider actions, such as habitat and hatchery actions supported through the Pacific Salmon Treaty, and how they contribute to overall Chinook salmon prey available to the whales.
- Restore spawning and rearing habitat and increase survival in migration corridors by removing impediments that have been documented as limiting factors, especially in river systems where Chinook stocks are a priority prey to help SRKW recovery.

PFMC
09/09/20