

HOUSE BILL REPORT

HB 2417

As Reported by House Committee On:
Agriculture & Natural Resources

Title: An act relating to southern resident orca recovery.

Brief Description: Concerning southern resident orca recovery.

Sponsors: Representatives Blake, Walsh, Muri, Buys and Appleton.

Brief History:

Committee Activity:

Agriculture & Natural Resources: 1/16/18, 1/23/18 [DP].

Brief Summary of Bill

- Appropriates funds to increase hatchery production of salmon for the purpose of promoting recovery of southern resident orcas.
- Establishes a southern resident orca recovery task force.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE & NATURAL RESOURCES

Majority Report: Do pass. Signed by 15 members: Representatives Blake, Chair; Chapman, Vice Chair; Buys, Ranking Minority Member; Dent, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Chandler, Fitzgibbon, Kretz, Lytton, Orcutt, Pettigrew, Robinson, Schmick, Springer, Stanford and Walsh.

Staff: Robert Hatfield (786-7117).

Background:

Southern Resident Orcas.

Southern resident orca whales are the only known resident population of orcas in the United States. They spend the spring and summer months primarily in the inland marine waters of Washington and British Columbia, and spend the winter months primarily in the coastal waters of the Pacific Ocean between northern California and British Columbia. The diet of southern resident orcas consists almost entirely of salmon, primarily Chinook salmon.

This analysis was prepared by non-partisan legislative staff for the use of legislative members in their deliberations. This analysis is not a part of the legislation nor does it constitute a statement of legislative intent.

Southern resident orcas are listed as an endangered species under federal, state, and Canadian law. The current population of southern resident orca whales is approximately 76, which represents the lowest population level of southern resident orcas over the past three decades.

The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife.

The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) protects and manages the state's fish and wildlife resources. The WDFW operates approximately 80 hatchery facilities throughout the state, with about 75 percent of facilities raising salmon or steelhead and 25 percent rearing trout and other game fish.

Summary of Bill:

The sum of \$1.55 million is appropriated from the State General Fund to the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife for the fiscal year ending June 30, 2019, for the purpose of increasing the production of Chinook salmon and other salmon by 10-million fish at certain specified hatcheries.

A legislative task force on the recovery of southern resident orcas is established. The task force must make recommendations regarding the recovery of southern resident orcas to the Legislature by November 15, 2019.

Appropriation: The sum of \$1.55 million is appropriated from the State General Fund to the Department of Fish and Wildlife in fiscal year 2019.

Fiscal Note: Requested on January 23, 2018.

Effective Date: The bill takes effect 90 days after adjournment of the session in which the bill is passed.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony:

(In support) The orca is an icon of the Pacific Northwest and of the world. Orcas are in real trouble, and people need to help. This is not just a Northwest issue—Washington's response to this crisis will be judged by the rest of the world and by future generations. Orcas can't eat habitat, and fishermen can't harvest habitat. There have been almost \$1 billion invested in salmon restoration, and yet salmon populations continue to decrease. Funding for hatcheries at both the state and federal level has decreased, and pinniped populations have increased 10-fold. Increased hatchery production is critical to avoid a fishery crisis. It would be good to expand the scope of the bill to include additional hatcheries. It would also be good to include a member of the recreational angling community on the task force created by the act. The "J" pod of the southern resident orcas is in a downward spiral, which scientists attribute to a lack of their favorite food, Chinook salmon. Their population is now at a 30-year low. When orcas do not have enough to eat, their bodies begin to draw on their fat reserves, which can lead to sickness and even death because of pollutants that have accumulated in their fat.

Hatcheries in Washington used to produce 3 million pounds per year of hatchery salmon and steelhead, and that number has decreased to 650,000 pounds per year. This bill offers real value to help out orcas and the entire ecosystem. The diminishment in hatchery production over the past 10 years has brought orcas to the tipping point. There may be additional ways to increase hatchery production through modifications to certain practices, such as placing weirs to capture hatchery salmon and steelhead. Harbor seals are eating approximately 85 percent of salmon smolts. There are three major threats to southern resident orcas: limited prey, contaminants, and the effects of vessels around orcas. There are other considerations to take into account when seeking to increase hatchery production, such as the Endangered Species Act and Hatchery and Genetic Management Plans. Hatchery production is a critical component of southern resident orca recovery, especially in the short term. The task force should include additional entities that may have a bearing on the southern resident orcas, such as utilities and the Canadian government. Whatever ends up being done to increase hatchery production, it is important to not take anything away from the steps made to improve wild fish populations.

(Opposed) None.

Persons Testifying: Representative Blake, prime sponsor; Carl Burke, Fish Northwest and Northwest Sportsfishing Industry Association; Scott Sigmon, Coastal Conservation Association; Penny Becker and Eric Kinne Department of Fish and Wildlife; Greg Mueller, Washington Trollers Association; Butch Smith, Ilwaco Charter Association and Westport Charter Association; Ron Garner, Puget Sound Anglers; Greg King, Friends of the Cowlitz; Steve Westrick; Dale Beasley; Coalition of Coastal Fisheries; and Phil Anderson, Pacific Fishery Management Council.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: None.