

SOUTHERN RESIDENT ORCA STATE AGENCY COORDINATION GROUP



MEETING SUMMARY

August 6, 2026

Attendees

Nataliya Stranadko
Laurel Hillmann
James McConaghie
Anna Roller
Lisa Phipps
Phil Hudspeth
Lt Ryan Howell
Howard Takata
John North
Mike Brown
Alyssa Lopez
Colin Reynolds

Oregon Dept of State Lands (DSL)
Oregon Parks & Recreation Dept (OPRD)
Oregon Dept of Environmental Quality (DEQ)
Oregon Dept of Land Conservation & Development (DLCD)
Oregon Dept of Land Conservation & Development (DLCD)
Oregon State Marine Board (OSMB)
Oregon State Police, Fish & Wildlife Division (OSP-FWD)
Oregon Dept of Fish & Wildlife (ODFW)
Oregon Dept of Fish & Wildlife (ODFW)
Oregon Dept of Fish & Wildlife (ODFW)
Oregon State University (OSU)
Defenders of Wildlife (DOW)

SRO Population Update

ODFW (Howard Takata)

The Center for Whale Research (CWR) will complete the 2026 SRO census in September; therefore, the official population size per the CWR [website](#) is still 74 orcas from the 2025 census (27 in J pod, 14 in K pod, and 33 in L pod) (Figure 1). During the past year, two new calves were observed in L pod: L129 first seen in February 2026 and L130 observed in June 2026. Unfortunately, L129 was not seen with its mother during the June survey and is presumed dead.

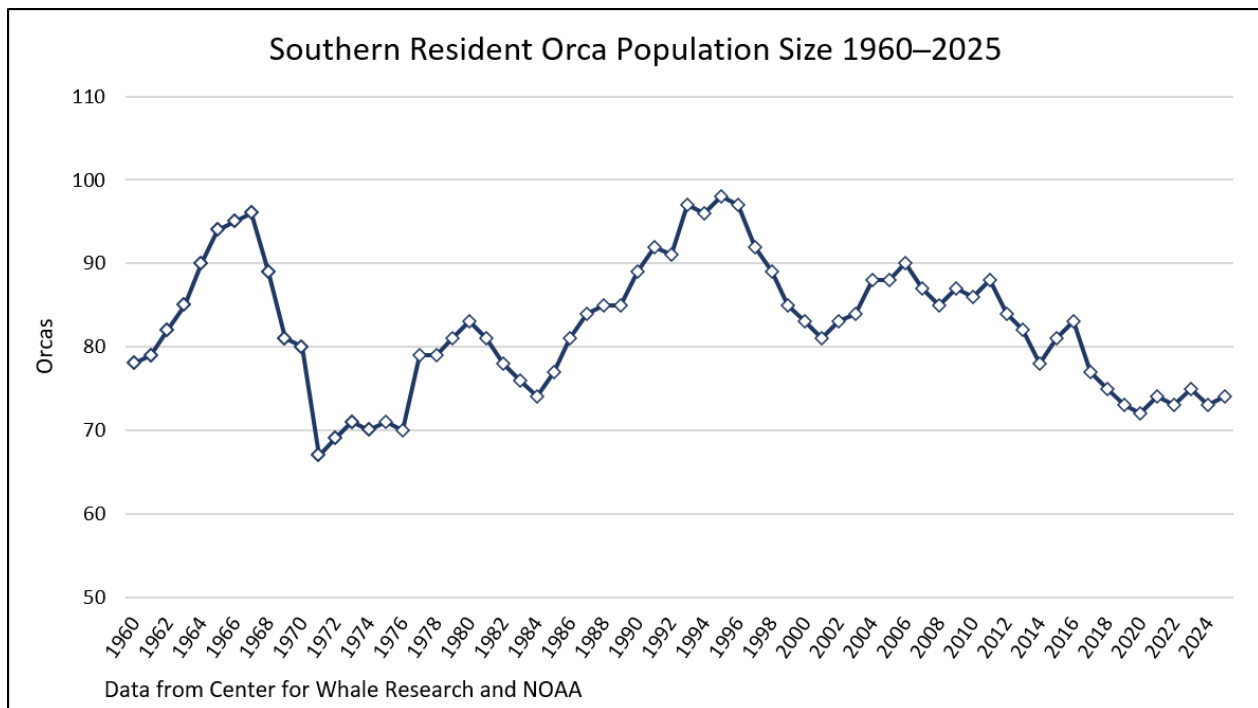


Figure 1. 2025 SRO Census, Center for Whale Research.

SRO Research & News

ODFW (Howard Takata)

Recent research projects related to SRO:

[Searching for Killer Whales Project](#) – A citizen science project involving a partnership between Adventure Scientists (citizen science research specialist), Oregon Shores (conservation organization), and ODFW. The project aim is to have volunteers collect observational data on SRO presence off the Oregon Coast from October 2025 through May 2026. This information is needed because protecting SRO from development projects in Oregon’s territorial sea relies on accurate information on when they are present in state waters. Preliminary results: 93 volunteers made 508 observation trips and spent 723 hours looking for killer whales. Observation effort spanned the entire Oregon Coast. No killer whales were observed during the study; however, this does not necessarily mean that killer whales were not present off the Oregon Coast during this timeframe. Poor weather during the fall, winter, and early spring can make viewing conditions difficult, and with such a small population, spotting a Southern Resident using sporadic observation efforts can be challenging. Although there was some interest among the partners in a second year of the study to help confirm results, they were not able to secure funding.

[Changing distribution of Southern Resident killer whales and Bigg’s killer whales in Washington waters \(Rand et al. 2026\)](#) – Rand et al. analyzed visual sighting and hydroacoustic data for SRKW and Bigg’s killer whales (BKW, aka transients) in Washington’s inland marine waters from 1978 to 2022. They used the data to develop species distribution models that show how distribution and habitat use for the two populations has changed over time. SRKW presence in inland waters varied from year to year but did not show any long-term trend. On an annual basis, J pod was most likely to be present in the inland waters while L pod was least likely to be found there. However, all three pods exhibited a decrease

in presence during the summer months. The authors hypothesized that reduced SRKW summer presence could be related to declines in the abundance of Fraser River spring and summer Chinook salmon that pass through the area during that time and were a historically important food source. In contrast to SRKW, BKW presence in the inland waters has shown a clear increasing trend since the 1970s. The researchers suggested that this could be associated with the recovery of pinniped populations and their rapidly increasing numbers. These changes in distribution could result in greater habitat overlap between SRKW and BKW, potentially leading to interactions between the populations.

Importance of SRKW interactions with other killer whale populations (Ford et al. 2026) – The conventional wisdom has long been that killer whale populations tend to keep to themselves and don't really interact with each other. However, Ford et al. reviewed numerous studies over the past several decades and found that interactions between killer whale populations appear to be more common than previously thought. Interactions generally fall into one of three categories: dietary, behavioral, and interbreeding. Consumption of common prey (e.g., Chinook salmon from the Pacific Northwest) by Southern Alaska, Northern, and Southern Resident killer whales is an example of an indirect dietary interaction between these populations. This interaction could have ramifications for SRKW survival because the other two populations live further north and have the opportunity to feed on returning Chinook salmon prior to SRKW, leaving them with potentially fewer prey. Additionally, behavioral interactions could be occurring between SRKW and Bigg's killer whales if the larger and possibly more aggressive BKW are displacing SRKW from parts of their habitat where the two populations' distributions overlap (see Rand et al. 2026). Finally, there is some genetic evidence of interbreeding between Southern Alaska and Northern Residents. Although interbreeding between NRKW and SRKW has not been documented, there is potential for this to occur in the future if habitat overlap for SRKW and NRKW increases due to shifting distributions. Since the SRKW population is highly inbred, the researchers believe some degree of outbreeding may be necessary for the population's long-term viability.

SRO-related issues in the news:

Petition to list SRKW as endangered in California – In November 2025, the California Fish and Game Commission received a [petition](#) from Orca Conservancy to list SRKW as endangered under California's Endangered Species Act. In April 2026, the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) submitted a [report](#) to the Commission recommending that it designate SRKW as a candidate species (with all the protections of a listed species) and continue with the listing process. At its June 2026 meeting, the Commission unanimously voted for SRKW as a [candidate species](#) and CDFW is currently conducting a status review with a final listing decision by the Commission in late 2027.

Stronger protections for SRO in Canada – In 2026, The Canadian Government implemented additional [measures](#) to aid SRO recovery. Chief among these was an increase in the vessel approach distance from 400 m to 1,000 m for better consistency with Washington's 1,000 yd rule implemented in 2025. In addition, speed restricted zones (≤ 10 kt) and vessel restricted zones were established in key SRO feeding areas. Canada will also continue its voluntary slow-down program for cargo ships for the 10th year in a row and expand fishery closures in important foraging areas. The Government also plans to place additional restrictions on chemicals of particular concern for SRO such as perfluorooctane sulfonate

(PFOS), perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA), long-chain Perfluorocarboxylic acids (PFCA), hexabromocyclododecane (HBCD), and polybrominated diphenyl ethers (PBDE).

Guest Presentation

OSU (Alyssa Lopez)

Patterns of co-occurrence between vessel activity and endangered Southern Resident killer whales along Washington's outer coast – For her master's thesis, Alyssa and her co-researchers studied SRKWs and vessel activity off Washington's outer coast using passive acoustic monitoring. The primary research questions were: 1) How SRKW vocals and vessel activity vary spatially and temporally, and to what extent do they co-occur, and 2) whether low-frequency sound conditions are associated with SRKW vocal occurrence vs. vocal duration. The researchers analyzed data from 15 acoustic mooring stations along the WA coast for the period October 2023–October 2025. Each station's acoustic recorder had a detection range of 2–5 km depending on season and location. Out of a total of 157,262 hours of recordings, there were 10,245 vessel events of combined AIS data (Automatic Identification System) and acoustically detected vessels, as well as 759 SRKW encounters encompassing 970 vocal hours. Vessel and SRKW co-occurrence totaled 168 hourly bins, with the majority during the summer. Co-occurrence was much more common along the northern WA coast (Cape Flattery to Gray's Harbor). Although vessel traffic was detected at the southernmost stations, such as moving in and out of the Columbia River, SRKW vocal detections in the area were relatively uncommon. The main takeaways from the study were: 1) Vessel activity contributes to the low-frequency landscape where SRKW vocalizations occur, 2) SRKW vocal occurrence is explained best by spatial and temporal variables, and 3) Elevated low-frequency sound levels are associated with shortened vocal durations for SRKWs.

Oregon Management Actions – Updates

ODFW (Howard Takata, John North)

- Howard presented information on SRO during a training session for OPRD Whale Watch volunteers at the Hatfield Marine Science Center in February and spent a weekend at the Whale Watching Center in Depoe Bay talking to visitors during Oregon's spring Whale Watch Week (March). Also, thank you to Nataliya from DSL for volunteering to help at the SRO table.
- ODFW's Communications Team created an informational slideshow on SRO to run on a loop at the Whale Watching Center. The video plays in OPRD's "Partners Corner" and highlights collaboration between the two agencies. According to park rangers, the video is popular with visitors and has generated many questions about SRO.
- ODFW Marine Mammal Program staff did a great job creating a fun and informative SRO display at Marine Science Day (April) in Newport. Especially popular were the large magnetic orca identification puzzle and the 3-D printed mini orcas.
- ODFW, OSMB, and OSP-FWD staff met in May to plan stakeholder meetings for the fall to gather information on the frequency of encounters between vessels (recreational and charter) and orcas off the OR Coast and to get input on the need for a vessel set-back regulation for Oregon state waters.
- ODFW Habitat Division staff have started updating the Department's State Agency Coordination (SAC) agreement with DLCD. The updated SAC will include more recent

programs and priorities (e.g., Nearshore Habitat, Marine Reserves, SRO state listing) so that agencies can better manage and protect natural resources within Oregon's Coastal Zone.

- HB 4134, signed into law by the Governor in April 2026 and going into effect in January 2027, raises the transient lodging tax in Oregon by 1.25% which will provide much needed dedicated funding for the state's fish and wildlife programs, especially those not funded by hunting and fishing license fees. In its 2027–2029 budget, ODFW requested a new full-time position that will coordinate sea otter reintroduction in Oregon and continue to coordinate ODFW's management actions for SRO.
- In June 2026, the Bonneville Power Administration (BPA) notified ODFW that it was terminating funding at the end of September 2026 for the Select Area Fisheries Enhancement (SAFE) program in the lower Columbia River. SAFE has been an important hatchery salmon program in Oregon for over 30 years. The ensuing \$2.3 million funding shortfall could result in lost annual production of 7 million hatchery salmon smolts. Since lower Columbia spring and fall Chinook have been identified as an important part of the SRO diet, this could lead to less prey for the orcas. Actions in ODFW's SRO management plan included an evaluation of Oregon's hatchery program to determine if increasing hatchery salmon production to provide more prey for SRO was logistically and financially feasible. However, given the large BPA cut, increasing hatchery salmon production for SRO is not likely in the foreseeable future.

OPRD (Laurel Hillmann)

- OPRD rangers collaborated with ODFW to incorporate SRO information into the agency's training for Whale Watch volunteers, and SRO informational postcards have been popular with visitors at the Whale Watching Center.
- In the last six months, OPRD did not review any permits for undersea cables or other projects that could potentially affect SRO.

DLCD (Lisa Phipps)

- DLCD has been cognizant of keeping orcas and other marine mammals in the conversation with permittees in Oregon's Coastal Zone.
- DLCD will be working on updating Parts One and Two of the Territorial Sea Plan, which is a major undertaking, but will provide a better framework and decision-making process for protecting natural resources in Oregon's territorial sea.

DSL (Nataliya Stranadko)

- In the past six months, DSL has not received any easement applications for undersea cables.
- DSL has proposed updates to its rule for undersea infrastructure easements in the territorial sea (OAR 141-083) regarding the introduction of sensors to be used with undersea infrastructure for environmental monitoring and data collection. These changes will strengthen protections for marine ecosystems and will apply to new projects beginning in January 2027.

- DSL is also investigating better ways of landing cables and working with other state agencies to conduct a further Cable Corridors Assessment Study as part of the marine spatial planning activity.

NGO Involvement in Oregon's SRO Recovery Efforts

DOW (Colin Reynolds)

- The effort to pass HB 4134 (Transient Lodging Tax) through the Legislature has been a big push for NGOs over the past several years (previous attempts at similar legislation go back over a decade). However, it may be one of the most significant ways that NGOs can help support the conservation and recovery of many wildlife species in Oregon, including SRO.
- While most of the funds generated by HB 4134 will go to ODFW, some funds might be available to other state agencies, possibly in the form of grants awarded through the Oregon Conservation and Recreation Fund (the latter per Laurel Hillmann).
- Oregon Shores collaborated with Adventure Scientists and ODFW on the Searching for Killer Whales Project so NGOs can also be an important partner on studies to help state and federal agencies learn more about SRO in Oregon.

DEQ Questions Regarding Conservation Memoranda

ODFW (Howard Takata)

At the last coordination group meeting in January, DEQ had some questions about the conservation memoranda that non-land-owning (NLO) agencies were required to submit to the Fish and Wildlife Commission in August 2025. The questions were primarily addressed to ODFW and were deferred to this meeting to give the Department time to provide a thoughtful response.

- Question: Since NLO agencies did not develop SRO management plans, what actions are expected of these agencies regarding SRO conservation? Oregon's endangered species act does not lay out concrete requirements or expectations for these actions.
 - Response: Even though Oregon rules may be a little "looser" regarding conservation memoranda, the expectation is that the management actions outlined in each agency's memorandum (as required by [OAR 635-100-0150 \(3\)\(c\)](#); e.g., Section III of DEQ's [memorandum](#)) will be implemented like those in management plans—i.e., they should carry no less weight. The emphasis on land-owning agencies and management plans in Oregon's rules may stem from the early days of the state's endangered species act which likely placed a priority on protecting terrestrial species. However, when addressing threats facing a marine species such as SRO (e.g., pollutants), the actions of NLO agencies like DEQ are just as important as those of land-owning agencies.
- Question: What are ODFW's goals and metrics of success and how will progress of the State Agency Coordination Group be tracked?
 - Response 1: ODFW's goal is to see Oregon state agencies stay engaged in SRO conservation and recovery and remain committed to the actions in their management plans and conservation memoranda. One of the purposes of the regular coordination meetings is to provide the opportunity for agency engagement and present information to help implement actions.

- Response 2: As for metrics of success, it's difficult to measure how much or even if Oregon's recovery efforts for SRO are actually helping the population because we are only one part of a larger effort that involves many federal, state, and local agencies, tribes, NGOs, etc. There are also other confounding variables (e.g., biological factors such as inbreeding) that can make the effects of management actions on SRO difficult to assess. However, individual agencies may have or be able to develop their own metrics for measuring progress towards agency goals. For example, DEQ may have metrics to measure improvements in water quality, particularly in Oregon's salmon streams. If water quality improves, presumably this would have a positive effect on salmon, and therefore a positive effect on prey availability for SRO. These are assumptions, but it may provide an indirect way of assessing whether the state's management actions are beneficial for SRO.
- Response 3: Progress of the Coordination Group is something that is difficult to measure quantitatively. For example, ODFW is part of a regional coordination group for SRO along with the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, Washington Governor's Office, and NOAA. Meetings are held bi-weekly and a lot of interesting and useful information is exchanged. Since Oregon is relatively new to regional recovery efforts for SRO, ODFW has been able to learn from the experience of the other group members. Even though Oregon benefits from being part of this regional coordination group, it would be very challenging to measure these benefits quantitatively.

Next Coordination Group Meeting

The next meeting is tentatively planned for February 2027.