

SOUTHERN RESIDENT ORCA STATE AGENCY COORDINATION GROUP



MEETING SUMMARY

January 27, 2026

Attendees

Nataliya Stranadko	Oregon Dept of State Lands (DSL)
Laurel Hillmann	Oregon Parks & Recreation Dept (OPRD)
Kaegan Scully-Engelmeyer	Oregon Dept of Environmental Quality (DEQ)
James McConaghie	Oregon Dept of Environmental Quality (DEQ)
Andy Lanier	Oregon Dept of Land Conservation & Development (DLCD)
Phil Hudspeth	Oregon State Marine Board (OSMB)
Lt Ryan Howell	Oregon State Police, Fish & Wildlife Division (OSP-FWD)
Howard Takata	Oregon Dept of Fish & Wildlife (ODFW)
John North	Oregon Dept of Fish & Wildlife (ODFW)
Mike Brown	Oregon Dept of Fish & Wildlife (ODFW)

Summary

As this was the first meeting of Oregon's SRO State Agency Coordination Group (Coordination Group), we started with each agency representative introducing themselves and briefly describing their responsibilities.

Coordination Group

Howard Takata provided an overview of the Coordination Group, focusing on its purpose, goals, and meeting process. The purpose of the group is twofold: 1) To facilitate communication, coordination, and collaboration among the seven state agencies involved in SRO conservation, and 2) to keep the agencies engaged in SRO conservation through regular meetings, and help hold them accountable to the actions outlined in their endangered species management plans ([DSL](#), [OPRD](#), [ODFW](#)) and [conservation memoranda](#) (DLCD, DEQ, OSMB, OSP-FWD). Furthermore, Washington State has a similar coordination group for its state agencies working on SRO recovery, and both state groups are connected to a regional SRO coordination group consisting of representatives from the Washington Governor's Office, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW), ODFW, and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA).

The short-term goal of the Coordination Group is for state agencies to implement their management actions for SRO in an effective and efficient manner. Coordinating and collaborating on actions should help meet this goal. The larger goal is for Oregon to make a

meaningful contribution towards SRO conservation and recovery. Now that SRO are listed as endangered in Oregon, it's important for the state to do what it can to help conserve the population.

Coordination Group meetings will take place semi-annually, with an agenda sent out ahead of each meeting. Meetings will generally be informal to promote spontaneous discussions; however, there will be some structure to them so that certain topics such as SRO population updates, SRO research and news, and agency action updates are consistently covered at every meeting. In addition, Howard will try to get researchers and others working on SRO issues to give presentations at Coordination Group meetings. A meeting summary will be posted to ODFW's [SRO webpage](#). While the Coordination Group is focused on inter-agency communication and cooperation, it will be important to include stakeholders in Oregon's SRO conservation efforts. This could take the form of guest presentations by non-governmental organizations at Coordination Group meetings or webinar presentations by ODFW's SRO Conservation Coordinator. The group will discuss ideas for stakeholder involvement at its next meeting.

SRO Population Update

Howard gave an update on SRO population numbers. Although the population has been in a gradual decline since reaching a peak of 98 orcas in 1995, it appears to have leveled off in the last 6–7 years at between 73 and 75 orcas (Figure 1). The most recent count from the [2025 census](#) (as of July 1) puts the population size at 74 orcas (27 in J pod, 14 in K pod, and 33 in L pod). Since the census, two calves were born in late 2025: one in September to J pod and one in December to K pod. Unfortunately, the J pod calf died, but the K pod calf is still alive. While the reason for the recent plateau in population numbers is unknown, and it is frustrating not seeing the population rebound, the fact that the population has not been steadily decreasing in recent years does provide some hope that management actions can help move the population in the desired direction.

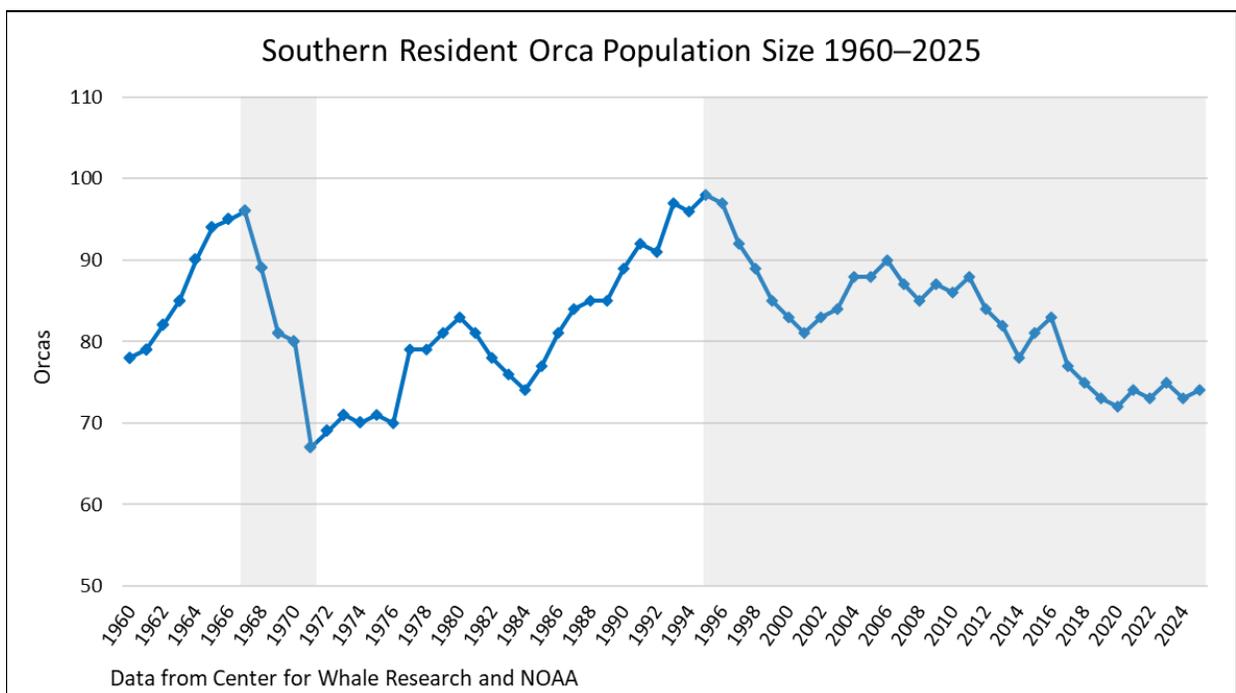


Figure 1.

SRO Research & News

Howard briefly summarized three 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. Its aim is to collect observational data on SRO presence off the Oregon Coast from October 2025 through March 2026 using a large group of volunteers (~1,000). 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. To date, observation effort for the project has covered most of the Oregon Coast, with one possible sighting of unidentified orcas near Manzanita in early December.

[*Potential use of underwater fiber-optic cables to monitor whales and orcas*](#) – In the fall of 2025, University of Washington researchers began evaluating the feasibility of using underwater fiber-optic cables to listen for the vocalizations of SRO. The technology, called “distributed acoustic sensing”, was originally developed for monitoring pipelines, but has been adapted to listen to the marine environment. It has already been used by Oregon State University researchers to detect the low-frequency vocalizations of fin and blue whales off the Oregon Coast, but the technology still needs to be tested on the higher frequency vocalizations of orcas. If successful, already existing underwater fiber-optic cables could someday be used to monitor the movements of SRO and other whales in near-real time.

Impact of vessel noise on SRO foraging – Many studies have documented the adverse effects of vessel noise on SRO, but this recent one by [*Tennessen et al. \(2024\)*](#) is probably the most detailed in terms of describing the effects on foraging. The study found that the probability of prey capture for SRO decreased with increasing noise level, and that they attempted to compensate for reduced foraging efficiency by spending more time searching for prey. Increasing search effort imparted an additional energetic cost on the orcas. Interestingly, females were less inclined to increase search effort compared to males. Although the researchers did not know why the females spent less time searching for prey, it could be related to the need for females to spend time on other responsibilities such as looking after calves or juveniles. Regardless, the disproportionate impact on females could have serious ramifications for the population's reproductive capacity.

In addition, Howard provided some information on a couple of SRO-related issues that have been in the news recently.

[*2025 Independent Science Panel Report on SRKW Recovery*](#) – A panel of experts on SRO, salmon, and other fields related to SRO recovery was convened in Vancouver, BC in March 2025. They were tasked with 1) Assessing the current status of SRO, 2) evaluating the effectiveness of existing management measures, and 3) identifying the most effective path forward for SRO recovery. The panel's final report was released in July 2025 and concluded that existing management measures had not been effective at recovering SRO and that stronger measures were needed. The panel's recommendations focused heavily on increasing prey availability for SRO. Specifically, they recommended transitioning salmon fisheries from marine areas to terminal locations in estuaries and rivers, allowing SRO greater access to older and larger Chinook salmon. The panel also recommended making

vessel regulations more consistent between different jurisdictions (e.g., Canada and Washington State) and ending the use of legacy contaminants such as PCBs.

[Petition to list SRO as endangered in California](#) – In November 2025, the California Fish and Game Commission received a petition from Orca Conservancy to list SRO as endangered under California’s Endangered Species Act. The petition has been accepted for consideration by the Commission and is currently being reviewed by the California Department of Fish and Wildlife. A listing determination could come in late 2026 or early 2027.

Oregon Management Actions – Overview & Updates

Since this was the first meeting, and not everyone was familiar with the various SRO management plans and conservation memoranda, each agency representative provided a brief overview of the management actions outlined in their agency’s plan or memorandum and how the actions related to SRO conservation. They also provided updates on any actions that had already been implemented.

DSL (Nataliya Stranadko) – As a land-owning agency, DSL has jurisdiction over the submerged and submersible lands within Oregon’s territorial sea. The agency’s connection to SRO conservation is through proprietary (ownership) and non-proprietary (regulatory) actions that the agency is currently taking or planning to implement to contribute to SROs’ conservation. For example, DSL is responsible for reviewing applications for the projects’ authorization in the territorial sea that could impact SRO (e.g., the installation of undersea cables). Currently, DSL is in the process of rulemaking for amending OAR 141-083 regarding granting easements for undersea infrastructure on state-owned submerged and submersible lands within the territorial sea. These new rules consider impacts on endangered species during the application review process, and rules incorporate the following statement: "The department will not grant an easement if it determines the proposed use or infrastructure is inconsistent with any threatened, endangered, and candidate species management plan adopted by a state agency with jurisdiction in the territorial sea under the Oregon Endangered Species Act". With several marine species listed as threatened or endangered under the OESA, DSL would like to see the development of project review criteria that can be broadly applied to all state-listed species and be considered as screening criteria as part of the application review process.

DLCD (Andy Lanier) – DLCD’s Oregon Coastal Management Program (OCMP) is responsible for reviewing proposed projects in Oregon’s coastal zone (seaward 3 nautical miles and inland to the crest of the coast range). The OCMP also works through the federal consistency review process to ensure that Oregon’s interests are considered when federal projects are proposed off the Oregon Coast. DLCD will use information on SRO to ensure that proposed projects do not negatively impact the orcas. DLCD can also work through the estuary management planning process to help improve habitat for juvenile Chinook salmon. Lastly, DLCD would like to update State Agency Coordination Agreements with other agencies to improve coordination on issues like ocean acidification and hypoxia that could seriously impact the marine food web and SRO.

OPRD (Laurel Hillmann) – As a land-owning agency, OPRD has management authority over the Ocean Shore Recreation Area which spans the entire length of the Oregon Coast. Agency responsibilities include reviewing permits for proposed alterations to the Ocean Shore. There

is the potential for an impact on SRO when development activities occur in the zone between mean high tide and extreme low tide. OPRD is also part of the Joint Agency Review Team (JART), which reviews proposed marine energy projects in the territorial sea, and the agency generally focuses on aspects of the project that cross the Ocean Shore boundary such as cable landings. In addition to these regulatory functions, OPRD also conducts beach management activities, including removal of beach debris such as fishing nets and ropes which could become an entanglement hazard for SRO in the ocean. Lastly, OPRD manages Oregon's [Whale Watch Program](#), organizing and training hundreds of volunteers that help coastal visitors spot whales and learn more about them. This has become an instrumental avenue for SRO outreach and education, and OPRD rangers have worked with ODFW to incorporate SRO into their volunteer training and educational programs.

DEQ (Kaegan Scully-Engelmeyer) – DEQ is responsible for protecting and improving Oregon's land, air, and water quality and the agency has collected a lot of data through its monitoring programs. DEQ staff identified 12 intersections between the agency's existing work and areas that are important for SRO conservation (e.g., prey availability, contamination, and oil spills [DEQ is the lead state agency for oil spill planning and response]). The intersections identified in the memo are related to ongoing work DEQ carries out under a specific set of state and federal mandates, most of which employ an adaptive management approach to review and update program activities. If resources and funds become available, DEQ can reassess actions and explore opportunities to dedicate more effort towards addressing issues relevant to SRO.

Kaegan also had a couple of questions for ODFW with respect to the non-landowning (NLO) agencies involved in SRO conservation: 1) Given they did not develop SRO management plans, what actions are expected of NLO agencies in this effort? The OESA does not lay out concrete requirements or expectations for these actions. And 2) What are ODFW's goals/metrics of success and how will progress of the Coordination Group be tracked? Kaegan would like to provide some guidance on these questions for DEQ leadership. Howard thought they were excellent questions, especially since the majority of agencies in the Coordination Group are NLO agencies, and that it would be a good topic for discussion at the next meeting after everyone had a chance to think a little more about it.

OSMB (Phil Hudspeth) – OSMB is responsible for recreational boating in Oregon (both motorized and non-motorized craft). The agency manages the state's boating safety education program and has a small group of seasonal employees that travel around the state during the peak boating season to inform and educate boaters at boat ramps, moorages and on the water. It's possible that they could spend additional time in coastal areas to help educate boaters on vessel disturbance of orcas. OSMB is also responsible for training marine enforcement personnel and can incorporate SRO-related information into this training. Additionally, OSMB licenses Oregon's charters and guides, including those involved in whale watching. This connection provides the agency access to an important stakeholder group and the opportunity to increase awareness about vessel disturbance of orcas. Lastly, OSMB is the lead agency in the process for setting new state boating regulations. If a new vessel regulation related to orcas was proposed in Oregon, OSMB would be the agency that brings it before the State Marine Board for approval.

OSP-FWD (Lt Ryan Howell) – OSP-FWD conducts marine patrols and enforces fishing regulations off the Oregon Coast, helping to ensure that salmon are not illegally harvested

and protecting potential prey for SRO. The agency would also be responsible for enforcing any new state or federal boating regulation related to orcas (state troopers are cross-deputized and have the authority to enforce federal laws). Troopers also help to enforce pollution laws in the state. Lastly, OSP-FWD conducts outreach and education activities, particularly in schools, and they could partner with ODFW to provide information on SRO.

ODFW (Howard Takata, John North, Mike Brown) – ODFW has a relatively long list of management actions in its SRO management plan, primarily because the agency’s mission centers on the species and its habitat, which usually means that there is a nexus with many different types of management activities (i.e., having many “irons in the fire”).

- *Support fishery management that considers the prey needs of SRO* – At the August 15, 2025 Fish and Wildlife Commission (Commission) meeting, several Commissioners expressed interest in sending a message to the [Pacific Fisheries Management Council](#) (PFMC) and [Pacific Salmon Commission](#) (PSC), the two entities responsible for managing West Coast salmon fisheries, that the Commission is very concerned about the status of SRO and that they support current and future management measures that consider the prey needs of SRO. In October 2025, on behalf of the Commission, ODFW’s Director sent a letter conveying this message to PFMC and PSC (US Section). ODFW has not received a response from PFMC, but PSC recently responded with a 3-page letter reiterating the various ways in which PSC has tried to address prey availability for SRO (e.g., funding for salmon habitat restoration and enhanced hatchery salmon production, and the use of fishery management measures that reduce harvest of Chinook salmon).
- *Protect SRO from oil spills* – ODFW is currently in the process of re-evaluating and updating its policies and procedures for oil spill response. Howard was able to observe an oil spill drill in Portland in October 2025 and gained valuable insight into how a major oil spill response is conducted and the need to prepare for a situation in which SRO could be impacted. As a result, in January 2026, he met with one of WDFW’s oil spill team leaders and a NOAA specialist on SRO and oil spills. Both of these agencies have experience with SRO and oil spill response in Washington’s inland marine waters. One of ODFW’s main concerns is that a large oil spill could occur in the Columbia River at a time of year (e.g., spring) when SRO are known to forage off the river’s mouth. The discussion focused on how the wildlife response structure would be organized for a spill in a transboundary river such as the Columbia and potential deterrence measures that could be used for SRO near the river mouth. WDFW would likely be in charge of the overall wildlife response due to the agency’s experience in that role, but both ODFW and WDFW would have other responsibilities assigned to them. In terms of [SRO deterrence](#), there are three deterrence methods that have been pre-approved by NOAA for use with SRO: 1) helicopter hazing, 2) oikomi pipes, and 3) underwater firecrackers. Each method has its advantages and drawbacks. Helicopters can respond relatively quickly and cover a large area; however, hazing requires low level flying to be effective, which poses a significant risk to air crews, and helicopter operations are very expensive. Oikomi pipes produce a noise that orcas try to avoid, but the method is most effective when there is a line of at least 10 boats, is very labor-intensive, and can only be utilized in calm waters. Underwater firecrackers are relatively inexpensive, and the technique is simple, but they can pose a safety risk to both orcas and responders. Due to the often rough sea conditions off the Oregon Coast, especially near the Columbia River mouth, helicopter hazing would likely be the only viable pre-approved deterrence method for this area.

However, ODFW, WDFW, and NOAA would first need to meet with the Coast Guard to discuss safety and other operational issues.

- *Educate boaters on vessel disturbance and assess the need for a state vessel setback regulation* – ODFW has been collaborating with OSMB on a couple of boater education initiatives for SRO. A short slide show was developed to play on a loop in the lobby of OSMB's Salem office. Many boaters still come into the office to register their boats in-person so it's hoped that they will take the time to view the video and learn about vessel disturbance of orcas and what they can do to avoid it. In addition, ODFW and OSMB staff shared a booth at the Portland Boat Show in early January to provide similar information to boating enthusiasts at the show and answer questions about orcas. In the next few months, ODFW would like to meet with OSMB and OSP-FWD staff to identify what the process will look like for evaluating the need for a vessel setback regulation in Oregon. For example, what kind of meetings will be needed and who should participate in those meetings.
- *Ensure that development projects in Oregon's territorial sea do not adversely affect SRO* – ODFW's Marine Energy Coordinator is closely monitoring the development of wave energy testing sites off the Oregon Coast ([PacWave](#)). Testing at one of the sites, PacWave South, could start as early as spring or summer of 2026. One potential problem that ODFW will be looking for is entanglement of fishing gear on the sites' seafloor structures or buoy mooring lines, which could then become entanglement hazards for orcas and other whales. Additionally, ODFW is beginning to update its State Agency Coordination Agreement with DLCD to help improve inter-agency communication and coordination on various marine issues.
- *Maintain existing hatchery salmon production and determine feasibility of enhanced production* – ODFW currently releases about 35 million juvenile hatchery salmon annually in Oregon, including 20 million Chinook salmon from the Columbia River basin, an important source of prey for SRO. However, flat federal funding, combined with inflation and costs associated with legal challenges have made it difficult to maintain these levels of production. Although ODFW's management plan states that the agency will evaluate the feasibility of enhancing hatchery Chinook salmon production to provide additional prey for SRO (especially spring Chinook that have a high fat content and low interception rate in ocean fisheries), it is difficult to imagine how Oregon's hatchery salmon production can be increased when maintaining existing production is challenging.
- *Restore salmon habitat and improve fish passage* – Although these efforts are ongoing, funding could become much more challenging in the future. Under the President's FY2026 budget, the Pacific Coastal Salmon Recovery Fund, one of the largest sources of federal funding for salmon restoration work, is slated for elimination. Oregon provides state dollars for salmon restoration projects through appropriations from the state general fund, the Oregon Lottery, and the Private Forest Accord Mitigation Fund (from taxes on timber harvest), but a significant loss in federal funding would be difficult to make up. Additionally, in 2025, the federal government withdrew from the 2023 Resilient Columbia Basin Agreement, a \$1 billion plan to restore salmon and invest in clean energy. In response, environmental groups and the State of Oregon re-initiated legal action against federal agencies, citing an emergency for salmon survival.
- *Manage predation on salmonids* – ODFW manages predation on juvenile and adult salmonids, particularly in the Columbia River basin where the river environment has been significantly altered by the hydroelectric system. For example, the agency's

Marine Mammal Program monitors and manages sea lions below Bonneville Dam and Willamette Falls, areas where adult salmon and steelhead are especially vulnerable to high levels of predation during their upstream migration.

- *Address contamination of prey* – ODFW regularly works with DEQ on water quality issues around the state that affect salmon and other species. These efforts are ongoing, and it's hoped that, as additional resources and funding become available, ODFW and DEQ can initiate new collaborative efforts on the water quality issues that DEQ has identified as intersecting with factors important to SRO.
- *Outreach and education* – ODFW has made outreach and education one of the cornerstones of its initial management efforts because it will be difficult to obtain long-term state funding for SRO conservation if Oregonians don't support it, and they won't support it if they don't know about SRO and Oregon's significance for this endangered population. Therefore, ODFW staff have spent considerable time and effort on presentations for webinars and in-person events, media interviews, and social media to increase public awareness in the state. One of the most important parts of this outreach and education effort is the partnership that ODFW and OPRD have developed to incorporate SRO information into OPRD's training for its Whale Watch volunteers. This large group of volunteers then goes out during Oregon's Whale Watch Weeks (in March and December) to pass on this information to the thousands of whale watching enthusiasts that visit the Oregon Coast. It's an excellent example of how this kind of multiplier effect can be used to reach a large audience with limited resources. ODFW would also like to reach out to Oregon's tribes to discuss collaboration opportunities for outreach and education that incorporate a tribal perspective on SRO.

Next Coordination Group Meeting

The next meeting will be scheduled for June 2026.