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NW Fishletter #312, January 17, 2013

[6] Experts Say Cutting Chinook Harvest Won't Help Killer Whales

A panel of expert fishery scientists has finalized its **report** on the science behind the federal government's contention that cutting salmon harvests would improve the lot of ESA-listed southern resident orca populations.

Led by University of Washington fisheries professor Ray Hilborn, the panel reiterated what it said last May in a draft report--that the government was too optimistic about how much the population might grow if Chinook harvests were curtailed, allowing more salmon to be eaten by the nutritionally-stressed orcas.

The panel said the southern orca population has been increasing about 0.71 percent per year, and would be expected to increase at about 1 percent per year in the long term if the sex ratio at birth was 50:50. Currently, there are fewer females than males.

The scientists said the delisting criterion of a 2.3-percent growth rate wasn't likely to be reached under current conditions or by cutting Chinook harvests.

Strong evidence exists that the orcas rely heavily on Chinook for food during the summer, said the report, but the killer whales will readily shift to more available stocks like chum salmon in the fall months, when Chinook are relatively scarce.

The panel concluded that malnutrition may not be the only cause for the poor condition of some southern resident orcas. They said the statistical analysis by U.S. and Canadian scientists was excellent, but cautioned that the correlation developed between Chinook abundance and the orcas' vital rates does not necessarily mean it is a linear causal relationship. And they panned the optimistic predictions of government scientists. "The Panel is not confident that understanding of the interaction between Chinook salmon fisheries, other predators and SRKW [Southern Resident Killer Whales] vital rates is sufficient to expect the model predictions of increased SRKWs to be accurate. The Panel expects the model

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predictions to overestimate the impact of reductions in salmon catch on SRKW."

In late November, NOAA Fisheries announced it was considering a petition to delist the southern resident orcas filed by the Pacific Legal Foundation last August. The PLF said new evidence shows that the population is no different from killer whales in other parts of the world. The PLF represents the Fresno, Calif.-based Center for Environmental Science, Accuracy and Reliability and two California farms, who said they would lose water for irrigation because of the orca listing. **-B. R.**

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NW Fishletter is produced by
Energy NewsData.

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