

SEHAB 2025-02-04: SRKW Prey TWG Report

There were two presentations that I attended on behalf of SEHAB in the past few months. The first was on November 26, 2024 specific to the Prey Technical Working Group (TWG). This presentation provided initial reflections on the success of the 2024 Management Measures which saw increased levels of compliance in fisheries closures in the Swiftsure and Juan de Fuca areas but less so in the Southern Gulf Islands and mouth of the Fraser River. Frustration was still expressed between citizens reporting violations to ORR and the perceived lack of response.

In addition, updates in Canadian and American research were provided. Highlights included discovering that the lipid content varied significantly (up to 30%) between different Chinook stocks (e.g. Fraser River versus West Coast Vancouver Island) depending on season and age of the salmon. Following the UBC-led presentation, that concluded that “prevalence of Chinook during the summer are 2-6x greater in SRKW habitat than in NRKW habitat”, questions were raised on the selection of the critical habitat for NRKW which could perhaps have led to unfounded conclusions. Finally DFO published a report in 2023 that stated that DFO has no “evidence” that Pinnipeds are causing salmon declines.

There is an upcoming Canadian Science Advisory Secretariat publication (currently in review) by Cameron Freshwater et al that has analysed ~8,000 Chinook samples taken in SRKW critical habitat from both the fisheries-dependent samples (South Coast Stock Assessment) and prey remains from the Marine Mammal Conservation Physiology program. This paper should provide insight on the success of the first returns (2023) of the 1M fall Chilliwack Chinook released specifically as prey for the SRKW from 2019-2024.

The second presentation was held on January 15, 2025 and invited were all the TWG’s and Indigenous & Multi-stakeholder Advisory Groups. This meeting was essentially a recap and reflection of the 2024 Management Measures and identifying the factors at play for the consideration of 2025 Management measures. To recap the legal landscape: the SRKW were evaluated under the Species-at-Risk Act in 2018 and were found to be in Imminent Threat. The unique eco-type were re-evaluated in 2024 and found to be still in Imminent Threat in spite of the effort and millions of dollars spent to reverse the declining population. The outstanding threats are prey availability, acoustic & physical disturbance, and chemical contamination. There are at least five Indigenous and multi-stakeholder and TWGs meeting with DFO, Transport Canada and Environment & Climate Change Canada to address these threats. In addition, American counterparts in Washington and federally are also pursuing restoration efforts. They and the Canadian groups provided updates on their activities.

The Canadian Management Measures for 2025 will basically remain the same. By 2026 it is expected that the Marine Mammal Regulations (Fisheries Act) will be legally amended to replace the 400m Avoidance Zones currently issued as Interim Orders by Transport Canada under the Shipping Act. It is hoped that the Avoidance Zone will then be increased to 1000m to match the 1000yd now legally mandated by Washington State. There were also new presentations from the province: Coastal Marine Plan/Strategy and PSF/UVic’s BC Adult Salmon Diet Monitoring. The latter is trying to address spatial and

temporal knowledge gaps in Chinook and Coho by collecting stomachs from recreational anglers and creel surveys mostly accessed during June and July.

In both meetings DFO noted the Ecojustice Petition for a SRKW Emergency Order, which was received by both the DFO & ECCC Ministers, pursuant to s.80 of the Species-at-Risk Act to protect the SRKW in June of 2024. The Ministers had noted in November 2024 that they believe that the SRKW are still in Imminent Threat of survival and are currently consulting with First Nations and Joint Fisheries Committees to determine what kind of broader measures could be implemented to reverse the threat. The consultation period ran from November 29, 2024 - January 19, 2025.ⁱ These proposed measures would likely then be recommended to governor-in-council (cabinet).

At both presentations it was made clear that if an Emergency Order were declared that the SRKW Management Measures in 2025 and beyond would probably be altered.

-Angela Kroning

SRKW Prey TWG,

February 01, 2025

ⁱ On January 28, 2025 Ecojustice filed a legal challenge over the failure of the Ministers to make a timely recommendation to Cabinet for an Emergency Order <https://ecojustice.ca/news/government-failure-to-recommend-emergency-order-to-protect-endangered-orcas-prompts-legal-challenge-from-conservation-groups/>