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# Federal government wants your opinion on whale-watching rules to protect orcas

By

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The federal government is asking the public to weigh in on current and potentially new regulations for whale watching near endangered southern resident orcas.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) has opened a so-called scoping period for 60 days to take public comment on whether existing federal regulations adequately protect killer whales from the impacts of vessels and noise in the inland waters of Washington state, and if not, what action the agency should take.

Southern resident orcas are an endangered species and have declined to only 73 animals. They are threatened by a combination of inadequate food, pollution, and [vessel noise and disturbance that makes it harder for them to hunt salmon](#).

NOAA's existing rules have been eclipsed by more strict regulations imposed both by the state of Washington and interim rules in Canada that sunset after this season. The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife also is launching a process under the direction of the Legislature to enact further restrictions on whale watching.

A voluntary no-go zone along the west side of San Juan Island should be made mandatory, some orca advocates contend, because it is an area critical to hunting salmon for the whales. The whale-watch industry opposes any moratorium and argues the main problem whales face is lack of salmon.

Scoping is the first step in a long process of making federal regulations that will continue on well past next year's whale-watch season. Whale watching is big business, according to a 2019 [study by Earth Economics](#). The study found whale watching participants who whale watch from boat-based tours or from terrestrial viewing points in San Juan County support over \$216 million worth of economic activity in the Puget Sound region every year. This activity generates more than \$12 million in state and local tax revenue annually and supports over 1,800 jobs, according to the study.

Email comments about current or possible new regulations to [OrcaRecovery.WCR@noaa.gov](mailto:OrcaRecovery.WCR@noaa.gov), using the subject line "Comments on Protective Regulations for Killer Whales Scoping." Written comments may also be mailed to: Seattle Branch Chief, Protected Resources Division, West Coast Region, National Marine Fisheries Service, 7600 Sand Point Way NE, Building 1, Seattle, WA 98115, Attn: SRKW Vessel Regulation Revision. Comments may also be provided in person during a scoping meeting in Friday Harbor.

The hearing will be held in Friday Harbor on Nov. 12 from 5 p.m. to 8 p.m. at Brickworks Event Center, 150 Nichols St. No other meeting is currently planned.