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Seattle Harbor Expansion Would Push Out Endangered Whales, Conservation Group Says

March 4, 2021 [KARINA BROWN](#)

State and federal scientists have pushed to protect endangered West Coast orca. But a plan to dredge the Seattle Harbor would accelerate all three of the reasons the whales are struggling, advocates say.

(CN) — The Trump administration rushed through a project to expand Seattle Harbor for ultra-large container ships that would further threaten endangered Southern Resident killer whales, according to a [lawsuit filed Thursday](#).

Only 75 Southern Resident killer whales swim the Salish Sea — a number that has increased since three baby whales were born in the relatively quiet waters of the pandemic. Noise from whale watching boats and ships headed to and from ports across the Pacific will increase when pandemic restrictions are lifted.

Added to that is a new worry: the underwater cacophony of ultra-large container ships that would visit Seattle Harbor, in the heart of the whales' home waters, and the release of hundreds of thousands of cubic yards of toxic material dredged during the harbor project.

The three pods, or family lines, of Southern Residents took a major hit in the late 1960s when aquariums stole 45 Southern Residents from their families, and killed another 14 in the process. Only one of the whales taken during that time survives today: a 53-year-old whale who lives at the Miami Seaquarium. The Seaquarium calls her Lolita, while supporters who want her returned to a protected cove of the Salish Sea call her Tokitae.

[Southern Residents](#) are distinct from Northern Resident killer whales, a threatened group that lives in the waters around British Columbia and Alaska. Both groups exclusively eat salmon. Transient killer whales occupy the Salish Sea and the Pacific Ocean. They eat sharks and marine mammals like seals.

The [final report](#) from a task force convened by Washington Gov. Jay Inslee called for Inslee to have the Washington Department of Ecology and Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife engage in environmental assessments of “project-related shipping’s cumulative effects on Southern Resident orcas.”

But the Seattle Harbor project, approved in 2019, would worsen all three of the primary causes for the orcas' decline: noise that drowns out the clicks and calls they use to echolocate their prey, toxic chemicals in the water that are absorbed by the fish the whales eat, and then into their fat stores, where they disrupt the whales' endocrine function, reducing their ability to reproduce, and potentially harming the salmon whales depend on.

Southern Residents are [starving](#) for a lack of Chinook salmon, so they are more likely to survive off their fat stores, which means the chemicals safely sequestered there dissolve into their blood stream.

Nevertheless, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers approved the project, finding that it was not likely to harm Chinook Salmon, steelhead trout or Southern Resident killer whales.

The Corps determined that the project wouldn't harm those species' habitat, even though it would require the dredging of over one million cubic yards of material during two years. About two-thirds of that will be dumped in nearby Elliott Bay. But nearly one-third of the dredged material will need special handling because of it is contaminated with toxic chemicals.

The Center for Biological Diversity sued the Corps and the National Marine Fisheries Service on Thursday, claiming the agencies didn't analyze the project's impacts by preparing a comprehensive environmental impact statement. That's a violation of the Endangered Species Act, the Center claims.

Killing and harming endangered animals requires a permit from the government. In this case, the Endangered Species Act requires the National Marine Fisheries Service issue a permit for "incidental take" of the endangered whales, since the project would "harass, harm, pursue, hunt, shoot, wound, kill, trap, capture, or collect, or attempt to engage in any such conduct," according to the lawsuit.

"Dredging up pollutants to bring in more and bigger ships will make two major threats to these endangered orcas even more serious," said Catherine Kilduff, an attorney with the Center. "The Trump administration signed off on the Seattle Harbor expansion without analyzing that harm. Southern Residents are starving to death, and increasing boat noise and traffic would accelerate their decline. We need to take better care of these West Coast orcas."