



ORCA SALMON ALLIANCE

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PRESS RELEASE: Trump's Offshore Drilling Plan: A Death Sentence for Southern Resident Orcas

(January 16, 2018) – The Trump administration’s recent proposal to expand offshore oil and gas drilling could hasten the extinction of the Pacific Northwest’s last 76 Southern Resident killer whales. Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke has proposed opening nearly the entire U.S. coastline to oil and gas drilling, including drilling in the Pacific Ocean for the first time since 1984.

“With only 76 individuals remaining, an oil spill within the range of the Southern Resident orcas would be the end of this family of whales,” says **Colleen Weiler, Rekos Fellow for Orca Conservation at Whale and Dolphin Conservation.**

“Trading away one of our most iconic species for short-term corporate profits would be a national tragedy,” says **Giulia Good Stefani, staff attorney at the Natural Resources Defense Council.** “Our orcas are under attack from all sides. Not only are Trump officials seeking to open the Pacific up to oil and gas drilling, but also Congress is bowing to industry and gearing up to gut core provisions of the Marine Mammal Protection Act, a law that has helped safeguard whales and dolphins for over 40 years,” Good Stefani explains.

“We know from history that oil and the Pacific Ocean don’t mix. A spill in these waters would not only devastate coastal communities and the local economy, it would risk the irretrievable loss of the Southern Residents, a unique population of orcas found off the coast of Washington, Oregon and California,” says **Robb Krehbiel, Northwest representative at Defenders of Wildlife.**

The *Exxon Valdez* oil spill in 1984 spewed 11 million gallons of oil into Prince William Sound, killing up to a quarter-million seabirds and thousands of marine mammals. At least 22 orcas died and a local population known as the Chugach Transients was devastated by the spill, with nine individuals disappearing immediately after the spill and six more shortly after. Twenty-nine years later, the Chugach orcas are functionally extinct, with no reproductive females left alive, no calves observed since the spill, and only seven individuals surviving.

Another Alaskan orca pod – fish-eaters like the Southern Residents – lost 14 of its 36 members after the spill. This population still hasn’t fully recovered. A large oil spill in the range of the Southern Residents could drive this struggling population to extinction.

“The spill potential and other dangers of oil development and transport on our oceans can seem a remote possibility. Until the unthinkable happens. I lived, worked, and conducted research in Prince William Sound, ground zero for the Exxon Valdez oil spill. It was unthinkable that we would lose 14 out of 35 whales in our most frequently seen resident pod of killer

whales. It was unthinkable that an entire transient population would be sent on a path toward inevitable extinction by a single mistake on an oil tanker. But it's what happened and I have spent years before and after the spill documenting this tragic event. A similar fate can befall these unique, endangered resident orcas in Puget Sound and the more oil development and transport, the more likely the chance of it occurring," says **Craig Matkin, founding member and director at North Gulf Oceanic Society**.

During the *Exxon Valdez* and *Deepwater Horizon* catastrophic oil spills, marine mammals were observed ingesting or inhaling oil directly or consuming oil-contaminated prey. This exposure caused a host of health problems, particularly respiratory issues, and suppresses the reproductive rate of populations, further harming their recovery from the initial spills.

"Drilling in orca habitat would be a death sentence. Offshore oil drilling threatens coastal communities and imperiled wildlife, particularly the critically endangered Southern Residents," says **Miyoko Sakashita, Oceans Director at the Center for Biological Diversity**. "The federal government should be protecting marine life instead of issuing reckless plans to endanger vulnerable species."

The Southern Resident orcas are already threatened by prey depletion, toxic contamination, and impacts from vessel noise and traffic. This population cannot survive another major threat in their waters. For example, Canada's proposed Kinder Morgan pipeline would increase tanker traffic through the Southern Residents' habitat by 700 percent, from five tankers per month to 35 – significantly raising ambient noise levels and the risk of an oil spill.

"At a time when the Northwest's ocean waters are already showing the stress of climate change, there's just no reason to risk our orcas and our coast for more oil and gas we can't afford to burn," says **Steve Mashuda, managing attorney for Oceans at Earthjustice**

In 2015, the National Marine Fisheries Service named the Southern Residents as one of eight marine species most likely to go extinct soon without immediate action. "Despite federal recognition that these whales are in terrible trouble, the Trump administration, and its supporters in Congress, would push the orcas one step closer to extinction," says **Cindy Hansen, education and events coordinator at Orca Network**.

We need to protect all our oceans and the communities and species they support.

The Orca Salmon Alliance stands with our local communities, business leaders, Tribal nations, Governor Jay Inslee, Governor Kate Brown, Senator Patty Murray, Senator Maria Cantwell—and all the other courageous voices in the Pacific Northwest and across the country who are standing up and speaking out to oppose this plan.

The Orca Salmon Alliance (OSA) includes 14 international, national, and regional groups dedicated to highlighting the connection between two iconic endangered species: Southern Resident killer whales and Chinook salmon. Our immediate objective is to prevent the extinction of the Southern Resident orcas by recovering the wild Chinook populations upon which the whales depend for their survival.