



March 15, 2022

The Honorable Raúl Grijalva, Chair
House Natural Resources Committee
1324 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Bruce Westerman, Ranking Member
House Natural Resources Committee
1324 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Re: H.R. 6987, to reduce the impacts of vessel traffic and underwater noise on marine mammals

Dear Chair Grijalva and Ranking Member Westerman,

The undersigned members of the Orca Salmon Alliance write to express our support for H.R. 6987 and urge inclusion of additional meaningful provisions to protect vulnerable marine mammals like the endangered Southern Resident orcas from ship strike risk and underwater noise.

Without bold and dedicated action from all levels of government, the Southern Resident orcas could be functionally extinct within the next few decades. The chief threat to their survival is lack of salmon, the orcas' primary food source. Underwater noise and disturbance from all kinds of vessels exacerbate the problem, interfering with orca communication and their ability to echolocate to find the scarce salmon. In the Salish Sea, new terminal and refinery projects are exacerbating the situation with a significant increase in large vessel traffic.

H.R. 6987, a bipartisan bill led by Representative Rick Larsen of Washington, is a critical step in improving the endangered orcas' chance of recovery. It helps position the U.S. as a leader in producing and adopting technologies that can quiet vessels, including by taking advantage of years of Naval research on quiet ship technologies. It supports ports who are leading the world in the adoption of innovative programs to address the impacts of ship traffic on marine mammals—like the Port of Seattle and the Port of Tacoma, both directly involved in Washington's new Quiet Sound program.

However, mortality and injury of orcas and other marine mammals from ship strikes is another serious concern that is not addressed by the bill in its current form. We urge the committee to take action to address this omission. On the west coast, the 57 recorded strandings between 2007 and 2019 of endangered whales with injuries consistent with vessel strikes were likely a significant underestimate, given that most collisions go undetected and most large whales after death.¹ Sensible vessel speed restrictions in important marine mammal habitats would help address these threats. Slowing vessels directly decreases the probability of lethal injury to whales, reduces underwater noise, and reduces greenhouse gases and other air pollutants. While we now have speed restrictions in Washington state

¹ Morten J, et al. (2022) Evaluating Adherence With Voluntary Slow Speed Initiatives to Protect Endangered Whales. *Front. Mar. Sci.* 9:833206. doi: 10.3389/fmars.2022.833206 (citing NOAA National Marine Fisheries Service, 2019; Reisdorf et al., 2012; and Pace et al., 2021).

for small vessels within a half nautical mile of the endangered orcas, there are no speed limits for large ships; Congress can address that important gap.

Thank you for your ongoing work on many important natural resource issues. We support H.R. 6987 and ask you to advance it, while working to add language on establishing vessel speed restrictions that will better protect the endangered Southern Resident orcas and other vulnerable marine mammals by reducing underwater noise and the risk of vessel strikes.

Sincerely,

Kathleen S. Gobush, PhD
Northwest Regional Director
Defenders of Wildlife

Nora Nickum
Ocean Policy Manager
Seattle Aquarium

Rein Attemann
Puget Sound Campaigns Manager
Washington Environmental Council

Joseph Bogaard
Executive Director
Save Our wild Salmon Coalition

Sophia Ressler
Staff Attorney
Center for Biological Diversity

Lovel Pratt
Marine Protection and Policy Director
Friends of the San Juans

Blair Englebrecht
Boating Programs Manager and Policy Analyst
Puget Soundkeeper Alliance