



July 20, 2026

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## CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER

Jacques R. White, Ph.D.

RE: Support for the Northwest Endangered Salmon Predation Prevention Act of 2026

Dear Chairman Westerman and Ranking Member Huffman,

Long Live the Kings would like to offer our support for H.R. 9621, The Northwest Endangered Salmon Predation and Prevention Act of 2026. We are significantly involved with research examining the relationship between salmon, steelhead, and pinnipeds in Puget Sound and there is considerable evidence that pinnipeds are limiting the recovery of salmon and steelhead which are listed as Threatened under the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

It is imperative that resource managers have appropriate access to the funding and Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) permitting pathways to effectively and responsibly manage pinnipeds. H.R. 9621 is an important component to reduce predation pressure on salmon.

Long Live the Kings is a nonprofit with 40 years of experience restoring wild salmon and steelhead and supporting sustainable fishing in the Pacific Northwest. Our programs, combining on-the-ground fieldwork with scientific innovation and broad partnerships, help decision-makers advance salmon recovery while balancing the needs of fish and people.

## Science supports the need for action.

The rebound of Puget Sound pinniped populations is a major success story for the 1972 MMPA. Populations were reduced to less than 2,000 harbor seals across the State of Washington by the early 1970s. The passage of the MMPA drove an impressive recovery, with pinniped populations now nearing 11,000 in Puget Sound and Strait of Juan de Fuca (Newby, 1973; Jefferson, Smultea, & Berejikian, 2021). The Salish Sea, which includes the waters of Puget Sound, the Strait of Georgia, and the Strait of Juan de Fuca, has what is possibly one of the densest populations of pinnipeds with roughly three harbor seals per square kilometer of ocean (Gaydos & Zier, 2014).

This high pinniped abundance, coupled with significantly degraded habitat that often aids in pinniped foraging, creates a major barrier to recovering Puget Sound's at-risk salmon populations. The Salish Sea Marine Survival Project, an international project co-led by Long Live the Kings involving two hundred scientists from more than 60 organization, found that an increase in the number of predators, especially harbor seals, is a major direct cause of juvenile salmon and steelhead mortality. While salmon and steelhead are a small portion of a seal's diet, the size of the seal populations means they collectively consume an unsustainable number of salmon. Studies from the project suggest that nearly 40 percent of juvenile Chinook are eaten by seals in Puget Sound and that seal abundance is negatively correlated with the marine survival of juvenile Chinook, coho, and steelhead (Pearsall, Schmidt, Kemp, & Riddell, 2021).

This predation is especially prevalent at local "choke points" around human infrastructure and river mouths. Up to 32% of ESA-listed juvenile steelhead leaving the Nisqually River Delta in South Puget Sound are consumed by harbor seals (Moore, Malick, Austen, Klungle, & Berejikian, 2022). Pinniped predation at Seattle's Ballard Locks is also a well-documented challenge, having been cited as a major contributor to the extirpation of steelhead in the watershed. It continues to put downward pressure on populations of ESA-listed Chinook as well as coho and sockeye (Mulvihill-Kuntz, Urgenson, Scordino, & Environmental Science Associates, 2024).

Much of this science was brought to bear when Tahlequah, an endangered southern resident orca, carried her deceased newborn calf around Puget Sound for 17 days. Following this tragic spectacle, a Governor's task force was formed to save resident orca and produced recommendations, including two specific to pinniped management. One of the subsequent work products was the Washington Academy of Science's Pinniped Predation on Salmonids in the Washington Portions of the Salish Sea and Outer Coast (2022). The report stated that the "preponderance of evidence supports the hypothesis that current populations of pinnipeds are likely impeding the recovery of salmon populations in Washington waters. As such, strategic lethal removal of pinnipeds is an approach that may be required for understanding the magnitude of impacts of pinnipeds on salmonids, either at local scales or at the ecosystem scale." (p. 44).

### **Reducing predation pressure on salmon and steelhead requires a holistic approach, and precise lethal removals appear necessary to balance our ecosystem.**

The vast range of salmon and steelhead face worsening obstacles in most habitats. Compounding the problem is a changing climate that increases the cost and difficulty of salmon recovery work. Progress restoring salmon habitat has led many to the realization that critical remaining projects are very large. These are generally outside of the capacity of longstanding and effective habitat restoration programs because funding levels have largely flatlined in comparison to the challenge and inflation.

Habitat improvements will help reduce predation pressures in many areas, but the expense and timeline to realize these benefits require parallel strategies that are more immediate. Moreover, it may not be feasible to adequately restore habitat in some areas, especially heavily urbanized areas. Other tools will be required. Aggressively investing in habitat restoration as a strategy to reduce pinniped predation that is responsive to the urgency of the problem would require expeditious and massive investments unlike anything we have seen to date.

In addition to habitat loss, the Salish Sea Marine Survival Project also found that disease, pollution, and a changing food web are likely contributing to our predation problem. Long Live the Kings and others are intensely researching solutions to these problems. While some solutions are apparent, we view this potential area of progress as a component to a broader strategy where pinniped predation is addressed from every angle.

Non-lethal options to reduce pinniped predation on salmonids are showing some promise, and they deserve investment, but there are some situations where they do not appear to be effective. There is no better example than the Ballard Locks where extensive interventions introduced in the 1980s and 1990s to limit California sea lion predation on Lake Washington steelhead were ultimately unsuccessful. The measures tested included everything from acoustic harassment devices and underwater firecrackers to barrier nets and relocation efforts. More recent testing of newer deterrent technology found that seals at the Locks would avoid the device by entering the fish ladder where they would maim and consume large numbers of migrating salmon.

Recent preliminary deployment of acoustic startle devices at the Hood Canal Bridge has shown some promise. At the bridge, up to half of young ESA-listed steelhead die trying to migrate to the Pacific Ocean, due mostly to predation by harbor seals. Data indicates that when the startle device was on, it reduced seal presence in the effective range by 64-80% compared to when the device was off (Hood Canal Bridge Assessment, preliminary results). Additional resources to test and refine the device deployment may produce improved steelhead survival, but it's unlikely to address the problem completely or in all situations.

### **Pacific Northwest resource managers deserve our trust to apply for and implement permits described in H.R. 9621.**

We are aware of fears that H.R. 9621 would lead to indiscriminate culling of pinnipeds that unqualified hunters would be invited to take part in. The current bill text does not appear to support this trajectory, nor do we see any evidence that permittees would choose this route given the option. Washington and Oregon fish and wildlife agencies are currently responsibly managing species conflicts in measured and cautious approaches that are rooted in science and that are sensitive to the strong perspectives on this issue.

H.R. 9621's addition of Tribal governments as an eligible permittee is an important component of the legislation. Tribal governments are co-managers of salmon throughout the region and have highly sophisticated teams of natural resource management professionals and scientists who we work closely with. Tribes also bring a management perspective that is in the interest of our communities and ecosystem – one rooted in experience built since time immemorial that looks forward seven generations.

### **We look forward to the evolution, refinement, and passage of H.R. 9621.**

Long Live the Kings encourages you to work with State, Federal, and Tribal resources managers to further refine H.R. 9621 as needed. Please ensure that all permit approvals and other action areas have reasonable timelines that allow for thorough consideration but do not unnecessarily delay actions. Also consider expanding the technology accelerator provision in Section 2 to include Puget Sound estuaries, rivers, and tributaries, and to include pinniped behavior modification technology and/or techniques in addition to exclusion technology. Lastly, increase appropriations to support the research, monitoring, and adaptive management to support rigorous programs.

### **Thank you for fully considering H.R. 9621.**

Our food web is out of balance. We are in a situation where our success recovering pinnipeds in the Pacific Northwest and our progress growing prosperous communities are jeopardizing our goals to recover Threatened salmon and steelhead, save Endangered orca, sustain competitive and sustainable fisheries, fulfill treaty obligations, and protect cultural practices.

**The Northwest Endangered Salmon Predation and Prevention Act of 2026 is an opportunity to better balance these goals, and we respectfully request that you respond to this opportunity urgently.**

Sincerely,



Jacques White, PhD  
CEO, Long Live the Kings

### Citations

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