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**NOAA FISHERIES TO REVIEW DECLINES IN  
NORTHWEST ORCA POPULATION**

The National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA fisheries), an agency of the Commerce Department's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), announced today that it will study the reasons behind a decline in the number of killer whales that congregate in Washington state's Puget Sound and Strait of Juan de Fuca in summertime.

The agency will begin a formal status review based on a conservation coalition's request to provide the whales Endangered Species Act protection. The review is the first in a series of steps that could lead to ESA protection by mid-2003.

"We take very seriously the recent declines in killer whale populations and are determined to find out what's causing it," said Donna Darm, the acting head of NOAA fisheries' Northwest regional office in Seattle. "Accepting this petition to conduct the review is an important first step in determining an appropriate course of action."

NOAA fisheries said it would now convene a biological review team of killer whale experts to try to find out if these whales constitute a distinct population segment as defined by ESA, why the whale's population is declining, and to make a recommendation about whether the agency should formally propose an ESA listing next May.

The Northwest's familiar black and white killer whales, also called orcas, are officially known as the "eastern North Pacific southern resident stock of killer whales," to distinguish them from other killer whale groups. They spend their summers in Washington's Puget Sound and Strait of Juan de Fuca and the nearby Strait of Georgia in British Columbia, where they are the frequent object of photographers and whale-watching cruises in the area.

The southern resident population has always been small, according to NOAA biologists, but it has fluctuated widely since record keeping started in the early 1970's, going from the low of around 70 to a peak of about 97 in 1996. The population is now estimated to be about 78 animals.

A killer whale workshop, convened by the fisheries service in early 2000 and attended by killer whale experts from Canada and the United States, affirmed the population drop but could draw no certain conclusions for the reason, although it cited pollution, lack of prey (especially salmon), and even whale watching as possible causes.

“We know so little about these animals outside their summer foraging areas,” said Brent Norberg, NOAA fisheries biologist. “We don’t even know where they spend the winter or the extent of their range. That makes determining the reason for the decline quite a challenge.”

If NOAA fisheries decides to formally propose the whales for ESA protection, it would have another year to complete more scientific work, hold public hearings and make a final determination, likely by May 2003. In the meantime, it will meet with scientists, including those from the state and tribes, to familiarize them with the steps involved in an ESA status review and to solicit information needed by the biological review team.

The petition to list the southern resident killer whales and designate their critical habitat was submitted by a coalition of conservation groups that included the Center for Biological Diversity, Center for Whale Research, Whale Museum, Ocean Advocates, Washington Toxics Coalition, Orca Conservancy, American Cetacean Society, Friends of the San Juans, People for Puget Sound, Cascade Chapter of the Sierra Club, Project Seawolf and Ralph Munro.

NOAA’s National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA fisheries) is dedicated to protecting and preserving our nation’s living marine resources through scientific research, management, enforcement, and the conservation of marine mammals and other protected marine species and their habitat.

To learn more about NOAA fisheries, please visit <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov>