

## U.S. Senator Maria Cantwell

### Coast Guard Whale Desk Launch Press Conference

February 21, 2024

#### Sen. Cantwell Remarks

[\[AUDIO\]](#) [\[VIDEO\]](#)

**Sen. Cantwell:** It's so great to be here with Captain McDonnell, with Lynne and Laura, and everybody who has played such an incredible role in this effort today. We know that we're going to see many, many great results out of this partnership.

The Coast Guard is hosting us today and I want to thank all of the men and women from the Coast Guard for their service to our nation. They do an incredible job in five different areas of responsibility, and oftentimes, with not all the resources. So it's more important than ever to our economy and we thank you for that leadership.

You are helping us with the growth of shipping and tourism, development in the Arctic, securing the Pacific region, safeguarding our marine life, and of course, the Southern Resident Orcas. And so we just thank you for all those responsibilities.

We're here today just standing a few hundred yards from Puget Sound, an economic and ecological engine for our region. And as the nation's second largest estuary, Puget Sound is home to hundreds of species fish, birds, marine mammals, and much, much more.

So these resources that are supported here today, when we're talking about tribal issues, commercial interests, recreational interests, and thousands of jobs across our state, fighting for Puget Sound and for all of us to exist together is a critically important issue.

In total, our maritime economy is worth \$30 billion and supports over 140,000 jobs. So we must protect Puget Sound and all of that. We must continue to protect Puget Sound. So today we are here to celebrate the victories we have won in trying to protect Puget Sound whales, including our endangered Southern resident orcas.

It's great to be here with NOAA and I thank them for their longtime leadership. The scientists of NOAA have determined that there are three major factors contributing to orca decline.

First, food, because 80% of the orca diet is salmon. In the Bipartisan Infrastructure Bill we included the largest recovery investment for salmon in history. This was a \$2.8 billion in grant funding and you've heard a little bit about it, but it is going to preserving salmon habitat, bolstering fishery science, and making sure that Puget Sound cleanup and restoration happens.

It also includes \$1 billion for the National Culvert Removal and Restoration Grant Program, a program that I authored to address salmon blocking infrastructure under bridges and roads. And it doubled even more funding for the Pacific Coastal Salmon Recovery Fund Project, \$300 million for salmon hatchery infrastructure, and nearly \$30 million in salmon science right here in the state of Washington.

The second thing we have to do is the threat facing orcas in pollution, including pollution from storm water. And we have increased resources to improve storm water quality including a historic \$71.8

million in Puget Sound recovery funds through EPA, the largest amount ever in a single year. So we're definitely also [working] on the pollution side, and I know you're going to tell me that we have more to do and we're going to keep doing it.

But the last issue is really the issue that we're here to talk about today and that is the threat to the orca population from vessel traffic. Vessel noise makes it harder for orcas to hear and when they are moving and searching for food it can become complex. And certainly, we don't want to repeat that of the fatal ship strikes on humpback whales in 2019 and 2020. So we're here today, proud to say, to announce a new partnership and technology that's going to help us.

I was proud to author legislation to establish a program that uses locator technology and allows the Coast Guard if you will, to act almost like air traffic controllers trying to have large vessel traffic get out of the way of our orca population, and certainly to others of our whale population.

Now I'm going to just call it the whale desk if that's okay. The whale desk will operate 24 hours a day, seven days a week and will serve as a vital tool for protecting whale populations in Puget Sound. This vessel traffic service enhancement is I believe, a huge enhancement for our region. You could say even for our fishermen and certainly for our orca population.

We heard from the Coast Guard that the new desk will improve communication coordination between vessel operators for Coast Guard, NOAA, and scientists, and help mariners reduce noise which is also critically important in this operation.

So today, we have vessel operators, scientists, and Coast Guard coming together which is really kind of a common sense approach. If you think about all the things that we fight for Washington DC, this one was an easy one, if you will, a no brainer. But thanks to all of you because you are the ones who can implement this.

These professionals manage the entire maritime transportation system. They boost our efficiency, they protect our environment, they help us move products across the globe, and now they will be ready to share and disseminate information that will help our whale populations including our beloved orcas.

[With] this approach we can keep our economy moving and we can keep whales moving too. In addition to the orcas, the whale desk will help protect migrating humpback whales, gray whales, minke whales, sperm whales, and other species that call on Puget Sound. And I'm proud that we have a maritime industry that is enthusiastically supporting this technology. That means we're all going to work together with this new tool.

So I urge our residents and waterway users to report whale sightings to the whale desk. That means everybody can get in on this game a little bit and feed information into the system. It's easy. By calling 206-217-ORCA you can reach the [whale] desk and -- oh there we go. Okay. You can help with sightings yourself.

If you report a sighting to the whale desk that data will be saved and it will use by researchers to help understand the whale population in the Salish Sea, further contribute to the recovery of orcas and other species for years to come.

As I said, we're all in it together, but I'm very proud today. I want to thank Nikky Teutschel from my team of course, because she does such great work on these issues. But we're here today to thank the

Coast Guard for implementing the whale desk and protecting whales in our region and giving us a solution that we're going to all work with.

Thank you all very, very much.