

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

DFO approves Salish Sea herring fishery despite concerns for starving killer whales, Chinook salmon

VICTORIA, B.C. - January 16, 2026 - Pacific Wild documented commercial fishing boats harvesting hundreds of tons of herring from the Strait of Georgia this past week, operating under the cover of darkness in what were once British Columbia's most abundant herring grounds. Today, it is one of the last herring fishing areas open in the province, while others remain closed due to concern for struggling stocks. Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO) has allocated over 2,000 tons of herring to be taken out of the Salish Sea this winter as part of the Food and Bait Fishery, despite documented declines of local stocks and concerns raised by First Nations, independent scientists, and coastal communities.

“What makes this fishery particularly egregious is that B.C. wild herring—a critical food source for salmon, whales, birds and countless other species—are being caught and turned into pet food, farmed salmon pellets and feed for marine mammals held in captivity,” said Ian McAllister, Conservation Advisor with Pacific Wild. “We are literally taking essential prey from the mouths of endangered Chinook salmon and Southern Resident killer whales, at the same time that starvation and lack of access to prey is identified as a leading cause of decline.”

In 2025/26 alone, the winter Food and Bait fishery may remove more than **2,000 tons of pre-spawning herring** from the Strait of Georgia, part of a proposed overall herring quota of **14,385 tons**. These fisheries disproportionately target resident herring stocks local to the Salish Sea that provide a **year-round, irreplaceable food source for juvenile Chinook salmon**.^{1,2,3} In 2018, COSEWIC identified prey availability—particularly access to large, calorie rich Chinook salmon—as an imminent threat to Southern Resident killer whale survival, warning that unless mitigated, this threat “may make survival and recovery...unlikely or impossible.”⁴

For decades, experts and local residents have raised alarms about the loss of herring from traditional spawning and migration areas. Continued exploitation, particularly during the winter months when resident herring aggregate prior to spawning, is pushing local stocks toward a depressed, altered ecosystem state—undermining recovery efforts for critically endangered Southern Resident killer whales and already-declining Chinook salmon populations.

“DFO should be focusing on herring restoration, distribution abundance – not allowing these remaining fragile populations to be exploited. Recent archeological research indicates that herring has plummeted to one percent of their historic abundance in some areas” McAllister added.⁵

The economic rationale for continuing the fishery also fails scrutiny. In 2023, the total landed value of all herring fisheries in B.C. was just \$5.1 million, representing only 2.8% of the province’s total commercial finfish value.⁶ By contrast, wild salmon, halibut, and other fisheries—all of which depend on herring as prey—were collectively worth nearly \$102 million upon landing.⁷ Marine-based tourism such as recreational fishing and whale watching generate more than \$5 billion to B.C.’s economy each year, directly relying on healthy forage fish stocks, including herring.⁸

“Industrial herring fishing has been shut down up and down the B.C. coast because the fish are gone. The herring remaining in the Salish Sea are the cornerstone of the marine food web, “ said Sydney Dixon, Marine Specialist with Pacific Wild. “They are demonstrably worth far more in the water than out. We need to shift priorities now—before this quiet collapse becomes irreversible.”

Pacific Wild is urging DFO to implement an immediate moratorium on the commercial Pacific herring fishery, excluding spawn-on-kelp, and to adopt a precautionary, ecosystem-based approach that reflects herring’s critical role in marine food webs and cultural, ecological, and economic resilience.

About Pacific Wild

Pacific Wild is a leading voice for wildlife conservation on Canada’s west coast. Through evidence-based advocacy, strategic campaigns, and powerful storytelling, Pacific Wild advances conservation policies rooted in ecological science, Indigenous knowledge, and long-term sustainability for the benefit of ecosystems, communities, and future generations.

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Backgrounder

1 Okamoto, D. K., Hessing-Lewis, M., Samhoury, J. F., Shelton, A. O., Stier, A., Levin, P. S., & Salomon, A. K. (2020). Spatial variation in exploited metapopulations obscures risk of collapse. *Ecological Applications*, 30(3), e02051. <https://doi.org/10.1002/eap.2051>

Broad-scale herring stock assessments often add up many local populations and treat them as one big “stock,” which can make things look healthier than they really are. While the overall herring stock may appear stable, individual resident spawning populations can be declining sharply or even collapsing at the same time. This happens because fishing pressure and environmental conditions vary from place to place, and losses in one area can be hidden by stronger populations elsewhere. As a result, resident or locally important herring populations can disappear without triggering alarm in regional assessments, even though the impacts on local ecosystems, predators, and communities are severe.

2 Petrou, E. L., Fuentes-Pardo, A. P., Rogers, L. A., Orobko, M., Tarpey, C., Jiménez-Hidalgo, I., Moss, M. L., Yang, D., Pitcher, T. J., Sandell, T., Lowry, D., Ruzzante, D. E., & Hauser, L. (2021). Functional genetic diversity in an exploited marine species and its relevance to fisheries management. *Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences*, 288(20202398). <https://doi.org/10.1098/rspb.2020.2398>

Pacific herring are genetically structured mainly by when they spawn, not just where they live. Herring that spawn at different times of the year mix less with each other, even if they are geographically close, which helps explain why local, resident spawning groups can remain distinct and vulnerable. For resident Salish Sea herring, this supports the idea that local spawning populations are unique and should be managed and protected separately, because loss of one timing group cannot easily be replaced by others.

3 Chamberlin, J., Petrou, E., Duguid, W., Barsh, R., Juanes, F., Qualley, J., & Hauser, L. (2021). Phenological diversity of a prey species supports life-stage specific foraging opportunity for a mobile consumer. *ICES Journal of Marine Science*, 78(9), 3089–3100. <https://doi.org/10.1093/icesjms/fsab176>

Having many different herring populations, especially those that spawn at different times of year, is critical for juvenile Chinook salmon survival. Young Chinook rely on resident herring stocks that stay in the Strait of Georgia and nearby waters, providing a steady, year-round food supply during a crucial growth period. When herring population diversity declines, salmon lose access to reliable prey at key times, which can reduce growth and survival. In short, protecting local and resident herring populations helps keep food available for juvenile Chinook when they need it most.

4 Environment and Climate Change Canada. (2018). *Imminent threat assessment for the Southern Resident killer whale (*Orcinus orca*) population*. Government of Canada. <https://www.canada.ca/en/environment-climate-change/services/species-risk-public-registry/related-information/southern-resident-killer-whale-imminent-threat-assessment.html>

Southern Resident killer whales depend on large, calorie-rich Chinook salmon for most of their food. The federal Imminent Threat Assessment found that Chinook salmon are now so scarce that whales often cannot find enough food to meet their basic energy needs, especially during critical times of the year. This lack of prey reduces survival, reproduction, and calf success, and increases vulnerability to other stressors like noise and pollution. The report warns that unless prey availability is urgently improved, this threat alone could make the survival and recovery of Southern Resident killer whales unlikely or even impossible.

5 Morin, J., Evans, A. B., & Efford, M. (2023). The rise of Vancouver and the collapse of forage fish: A story of urbanization and the destruction of an aquatic ecosystem on the Salish Sea (1885–1920 CE). *Human Ecology*, 51, 303–322. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10745-023-00398-w>

Forage fish, like Pacific herring, were once extremely abundant around Vancouver and the Salish Sea, supporting Indigenous food systems and the wider marine ecosystem for thousands of years. After European settlement, industrial fishing, habitat destruction, pollution, and unregulated development caused these fish populations to collapse very quickly. In some areas, Pacific herring declined by up to 99% within just a few decades, long before scientists began monitoring the ecosystem. Because later generations treated these already-damaged conditions as “normal,” the true scale of loss has been largely overlooked.

6 Department of Fisheries and Oceans Canada. (2025, January 30). *Seafisheries landed value by province, 2023*. Government of Canada. <https://www.dfo-mpo.gc.ca/stats/commercial/land-debarq/sea-maritimes/s2023pv-eng.htm>

7 Surma, S., Pitcher, T. J., Kumar, R., Varkey, D., Pakhomov, E. A., & Lam, M. E. (2018). Herring supports Northeast Pacific predators and fisheries: Insights from ecosystem modelling and management strategy evaluation. *PLoS ONE*, 13(7), e0196307. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0196307>

Pacific herring are an important food source for many larger fish species that people also fish commercially, as well as for marine mammals and seabirds. When herring numbers drop, it doesn't just affect animals like whales and seals — it also affects other fish that eat herring, showing that herring support both the ecosystem and other fisheries by helping sustain the food web.

8 Province of British Columbia. (2024). *B.C. Coastal Marine Strategy*. https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/environment/air-land-water/water/coastal-marine-strategy/coastal_marine_strategy.pdf

9 Lavoie, J. (2025, November 14). *We are going to fight to save the herring. The Tyee*. https://thetyee.ca/News/2025/11/14/Fight-Save-Herring/?utm_source=daily&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=141125

“The way things are going, we will see the end of Pacific herring in our territory,” said Chief Eric Pelkey of the W̱SÁNEĆ Leadership Council, recalling when prolific herring in the Strait of Georgia formed a vital part of Indigenous diets. In November 2024 W̱SÁNEĆ Hereditary Chiefs issued a declaration calling for a moratorium on all commercial herring fisheries in the Strait of Georgia to provide “overwintering and migrating herring with a refuge from the commercial fishing pressure that is present almost year-round.”