



Wild Fish Conservancy
N O R T H W E S T
S C I E N C E E D U C A T I O N A D V O C A C Y

Washington State Makes History: First in the World to Permanently Ban Commercial Net Pens to Protect Wild Salmon, Orcas, and Puget Sound Ecosystems



Members of the Our Sound, Our Salmon coalition celebrating in Olympia, WA on January 7, 2025 moments after the Board of Natural Resources approved a new rule permanently banning commercial net pen aquaculture.

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Olympia, WA – January 9, 2025 – This week, we are celebrating a monumental environmental victory for Puget Sound’s ecosystems, Washington Tribal Nations, and the protection of our iconic wild salmon and Southern Resident orcas. On Tuesday, Washington State made history, becoming the first—and only—place in the world to successfully remove and permanently ban commercial net pen aquaculture.

On January 7, the Washington State Board of Natural Resources cast a landmark vote to adopt a new rule prohibiting commercial finfish net pen aquaculture in all state-managed marine waters. This decision ensures that this dangerous industry will never return to threaten Puget Sound’s ecosystems, safeguarding the health of Washington’s public waters for generations to come.

“This is a landmark moment for environmental protection,” said Emma Helverson, Executive Director of Wild Fish Conservancy. “Thanks to the commitment of the public and the leadership of Tribal Nations, we have achieved something extraordinary. This victory is not just for Puget Sound—it’s for every community, every species, and every ecosystem that has been impacted by the harmful practice of commercial net pens.”

This week’s victory is the direct result of Commissioner of Public Lands Hilary Franz’s 2022 decision to deny the industry new decade-long leases for net pens, and her subsequent executive order directing the Department of Natural Resources to develop rules to permanently ban this practice. These actions resulted in the complete

removal of commercial net pens in Washington, making 2024 the first year in four decades that Puget Sound was free from daily pollution and the devastating impacts that net pens cause.

“I hope the public will join us in thanking Commissioner Hilary Franz and her committed agency staff. From the very first steps she took in response to the 2017 Cypress Island net pen collapse, Commissioner Franz has been a fierce and unwavering leader, holding the industry accountable for their harmful actions, listening to the public’s voices, and ultimately making this historic victory possible,” says Helverson.

The rule was adopted by a majority 4-2 vote, with Commissioner Franz, Skagit County Commissioner Lisa Janicki, University of Washington’s Dan Brown, and Governor Jay Inslee’s financial advisor Jim Cahill all voting to approve the ban. The decision was informed by overwhelming public support, with over 80% of public comments submitted in favor of the permanent ban and is a direct response to the ongoing crisis facing wild salmon populations and Southern Resident killer whales, which rely on healthy, abundant runs for survival.

Just days before the vote, Tablequah (J35), the Southern Resident orca who made global headlines in 2018 after she carried her stillborn calf for 17 days straight, [was observed once again grieving her newest dead calf](#). [Recent research](#) shows an alarming 69% of Southern Resident orca pregnancies end in miscarriage due to malnutrition and that miscarriages far outnumber births of endangered orcas. The stark reality of mother orcas losing their calves is a painful reminder that these whales are starving and struggling to survive due to the depletion of large, quality, and abundant wild Chinook salmon, their primary food source.

“In casting their votes for the permanent ban, these leaders set a new standard of environmental stewardship for governments and leaders, emphasizing that merely *minimizing* risks isn’t enough given the crisis facing wild salmon and the orcas who depend on them,” says Helverson. “These leaders recognize completely *avoiding* risk and harm is the only way to prevent the further decline toward extinction for these iconic species and to protect the public’s immense sacrifices and investments in their recovery.”

Since 2017, Wild Fish Conservancy has led the [Our Sound, Our Salmon](#) (OSOS) campaign and coalition to protect wild salmon and Puget Sound from the harm of net pen aquaculture. Over the past decade, this dedicated coalition has worked alongside Washington’s Tribal Nations in the legislature, courts, and countless advocacy efforts. In December, [over 186 businesses, organizations, and 3,220 individuals took time away from the holidays to endorse a petition](#) demanding action and sending a clear message to the Board of the public support for the permanent ban.

In an open letter thanking supporters for their efforts over the last decade, Helverson stated, “All of our success to date, culminating in this week’s historic action, is a powerful statement of what is possible when people unite to challenge the status quo. This victory honors the strength and resilience of Tribal Nations, the tireless efforts of local communities, and the overwhelming will of the public who have championed a vision for a cleaner, healthier Puget Sound. It is a testament to the power of collective action and the belief that when the people speak, lasting change is possible.” Read the full letter [here](#).

Washington’s success will also serve as a powerful model providing important momentum for the global movement to eliminate open water net pens, an industry that poses a threat to marine ecosystems everywhere in the world they exist. Similar efforts to protect public waters and ecosystems from this industry are already underway in countries such as British Columbia, Chile, Scotland, Norway, Finland, and Tasmania and through the [Global Salmon Farming Resistance](#).

“As we celebrate this incredible achievement, we also acknowledge that the work is far from over,” Helverson continued. “The global coalition against net pens is growing stronger every day, and Washington’s bold decision sets a new standard for environmental stewardship. We are standing in solidarity with communities worldwide to ensure this dangerous industry become a thing of the past—not just in Puget Sound, but in every region where this industry harms our waters, wildlife, and communities.”

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About Our Sound, Our Salmon

Launched in 2017, Our Sound, Our Salmon (OSOS) is a campaign facilitated by Wild Fish Conservancy, supported by a broad-based coalition working together to protect wild salmon, orcas, and the greater health of Puget Sound from the damaging impacts of commercial net pen aquaculture. Learn more about this campaign’s history and impact at oursound-oursalmon.org

About Wild Fish Conservancy

Wild Fish Conservancy is a conservation ecology organization founded in 1989 and working from California to Alaska to conserve, protect, and restore the northwest’s wild fish and the ecosystems they depend on through science, education, and advocacy. For over two decades, WFC has been watchdogging the commercial net pen aquaculture industry, advancing our region’s scientific understanding of the risks net pens pose, and working with colleagues around the world to bring an end to this practice in public waters. Learn more at wildfishconservancy.org

Further Reading:

- WA - DNR | [Board of Natural Resources Ends Open Sea Net Pen Salmon Farms in Washington Waters](#)
- Seattle Times | [WA bans commercial net-pen fish farming](#)
- Seattle Times | [Opinion: Protect WA’s waters and tribal sovereignty: Ban commercial finfish net-pen aquaculture](#)