



Wild Fish Conservancy  
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Alaskan Chinook, Photo by Conrad Gowell

## Lawsuit Seeks Overdue Federal Decision on ESA Protections for Alaskan Chinook Salmon in Peril

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**ANCHORAGE, AK** — Today, Wild Fish Conservancy [filed suit](#) against NOAA Fisheries (NOAA) for failing to meet essential legal deadlines under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) and delaying federal protections to at-risk Alaskan Chinook salmon. Once abundant, wild Chinook—also known as king salmon—are experiencing chronic declines throughout the streams that flow into the Gulf of Alaska, threatening the health of ecosystems, indigenous cultural practices and food security, local economies, and communities that all depend on wild salmon.

On January 11, 2024, Wild Fish Conservancy [formally petitioned](#) NOAA to grant federal ESA protections for Chinook from rivers that flow into the Gulf of Alaska. On May 24, 2024, NOAA responded with [a positive finding](#), confirming the petition contained substantial information indicating ESA-listing and protection may be warranted. The initial finding triggered an in-depth review, including a formal public input process requesting relevant commercial or scientific information.

Under the ESA, NOAA had 12-months, until January 11, 2025, to review the data on Gulf of Alaska Chinook salmon and determine whether ‘threatened’ or ‘endangered’ status is warranted. Today, the Conservancy filed suit against NOAA for missing this legally required deadline and further delaying protections for declining Chinook populations that may be at risk of extinction.

“It should not take a lawsuit to make the federal government uphold its legal responsibility, but with the crisis facing Alaskan Chinook, we are out of time and options,” said Emma Helverson, Executive Director of Wild Fish Conservancy. “The Endangered Species Act sets clear deadlines for a reason, to evaluate the risk of extinction and trigger action while recovery is still possible. By ignoring those deadlines, NOAA isn’t just breaking the law—it’s perpetuating the collapse of Alaskan Chinook and threatening the ecosystems and communities that depend on them.”

Despite their historical abundance, data from the state of Alaska demonstrates persistent declines in Chinook abundance, size, age, diversity, and spatial structure. Many are surprised to learn some Alaskan Chinook populations are in even worse condition than other Pacific Northwest populations already listed under the ESA. Threats include overfishing, bycatch in trawl fisheries, hatchery impacts, habitat degradation, and climate change. Alaska has already recognized many of these stocks as ‘species of concern’ over the last decade, due to their continued decline in the face of the state’s attempted regulatory actions.

“Alaska’s leadership insists it’s taking aggressive steps to recover Chinook and that those efforts are proving successful, but the state’s own data shows this couldn’t be further from the truth,” says Helverson. “We’ve heard directly from Alaskan fishers, Indigenous individuals, and the general public who depend on Gulf of Alaska Chinook who are frustrated by the state’s false narrative and inaction. These individuals expressed relief and optimism in the ESA process, not only for its comprehensive review, but also for the tangible actions and increased resources it can bring to begin rebuilding populations.”

In many cases, the number of Chinook salmon officials forecast to return are well below the minimum number of fish needed to reproduce at a rate to simply replace themselves, let alone to recover prior abundance. Compounding the problem, actual returns frequently fall even lower than predicted by the state— a fact that doesn’t become known until after management decisions have already been made. Over time, steadily declining returns have resulted in consecutive years of emergency fishery closures for in-river commercial, recreational, and subsistence fisheries, including for indigenous communities. Meanwhile, Alaska’s government continues to authorize large-scale commercial ocean fisheries to harvest or kill as bycatch Chinook from these same populations; threats identified in the petition.

The Kenai River, world-renowned for its Chinook salmon, is at a historic low. In 2024, the early-season count showed just 1,365 fish returning—half of what officials modeled and the fifth consecutive year of missed forecasts. The late-season numbers were equally concerning, with only 6,930 Chinook returning, a far cry from the historical average of ~28,000 over the last four decades. Also alarming, the river that once produced the world’s largest Chinook has now gone three straight years without seeing any of its oldest and largest age-7 salmon return.

On the west side of Kodiak Island in the Karluk River, goals to maintain the population require at least 3,000 Chinook to return annually. In 2024, only 76 fish came back to spawn. The Ayakulik River, the largest river system on the island, saw only 354 Chinook return to spawn, just 7% of that watershed’s population goal of 4,800.

“Government officials, seafood certifiers, and the fishing industry continue to assure the public that Alaska’s Chinook are well managed, but the data tells a different story. This year, Chinook fisheries across the Gulf of Alaska are closed on an emergency basis, yet fisheries managers continue to stubbornly defend their position that the fish are not at risk of extinction.” says Conrad Gowell, a biologist with Wild Fish Conservancy and co-author of the petition. “The longer the federal government waits to release their findings and take appropriate action, the more severe the social, economic, and environmental consequences will be.”

The agency's continued failure to comply with the 12-month deadline continues NOAA's troubling pattern of disregarding the ESA and the urgent reality that species on the brink of extinction do not have time to wait. For example, NOAA has also failed to issue legally required final determinations on ESA listing petitions for [Olympia Peninsula steelhead](#), Oregon and California coast Chinook, and Washington coast Chinook, decisions that are now overdue by one or more years. As these imperiled species continue to decline, NOAA's repeated failures expose systemic dysfunction within the agency and continue to emphasize the urgent need to enforce the statutory requirements of the ESA.

"The law at its best doesn't simply prohibit conduct— it enables new possibilities. As we advocate for the protection of wild salmon and their ecosystems, we must use legal tools not just to defend what remains, but to reimagine what could be," says Helverson. "Tangible actions, additional resources, and stronger protections are what these fish and the communities who depend on them desperately need and what we hope this Endangered Species Act process can help provide."

Specifics on the data submitted, frequently asked questions, and the full petition are available on Wild Fish Conservancy's [website](#). Information on the federal listing process under the Endangered Species Act is available on [NOAA Fisheries' website](#).

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Wild Fish Conservancy is represented in this matter by Kampmeier & Knutsen, PLLC, of Portland, Oregon and Seattle, Washington and Eubanks & Associates, PLLC, of Washington D.C.

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Wild Fish Conservancy is a nonprofit conservation organization headquartered in Washington State and working from California to Alaska to preserve, protect and restore the northwest's wild fish and the ecosystems they depend on, through science, education, and advocacy. [wildfishconservancy.org](http://wildfishconservancy.org)