

Teams pack boats with fish to prepare to feed ailing orca

August 10 2018, by Phuong Le



The Lummi police boat heads to the west side of San Juan Island in an attempt to feed chinook salmon to an ailing young orca, J50, seen from the King County Research Vessel SoundGardian, Friday, Aug. 10, 2018. Teams of whale experts raced out to sea Thursday to help an ailing young killer whale, but they don't plan to intervene to help a mother orca in the same critically endangered pod that has been pushing the body of her dead calf for more than two weeks. (Alan Berner/The Seattle Times via AP, Pool)

Teams taking drastic measures to save a young, ailing killer whale loaded up two boats with live fish and rushed to waters near an island off

Washington state Friday, preparing if needed to feed the critically endangered orca a day after injecting it with medicine.

But by early afternoon, it appeared the 3½-year-old female orca known as J50 was too far north in Canadian waters and that any trial feeding effort would not happen Friday, said Brad Hanson, a wildlife biologist with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration who is leading response efforts on the [water](#).

The team led by the U.S. agency lacks a permit to feed the sick whale live salmon in Canadian waters, though it had one for medical treatment. NOAA would apply for the feeding permit if conditions are right, said Lynne Barre, NOAA Fisheries' recovery coordinator for the whales.

The team will decide in the field whether to feed the orca, which is emaciated and possibly suffering an infection, depending on a number of factors, including the animal's behavior and location, Barre told reporters.

With the whale not close by, crews did a practice run for the feeding, sending salmon through a turquoise tube off the back of a boat. Researchers with the Whale Sanctuary Project took a sample of the fish scales so they can later genetically track whether the whales consume that fish, while other crews with the Lummi tribe scooped the salmon out of a large bin and sent it into the water.



Chinook salmon from the Marblemount hatchery on the Skagit River are loaded onto the King County Research Vessel SoundGuardian at the dock in Bellingham, Wash., Friday, Aug., 10, 2018. The salmon are intended to feed ailing killer whale in a rare effort to save her. (Alan Berner/The Seattle Times via AP, Pool)

The whale was given a dose of antibiotics from a dart Thursday, and a veterinarian was able to do a health assessment. Marty Haulena, head veterinarian at Vancouver Aquarium, thinks about half of the dose went into the young orca.

He says the whale is incredibly skinny but was swimming well and there were no obvious signs of abnormality with her skin. They didn't observe whether J50 had been eating or not.

It was dramatic how thin she was, Haulena said, adding that he wants to know more about her digestive system and whether she's been eating.

He said she's breathing normally, taking deep dives and easily keeping up with her group, so respiratory disease is falling down the list of concerns. The team of experts who followed the whale on the water for about six hours Thursday got a breath sample to analyze whether she might have bacteria or fungus in her airway.



Lummi tribal members and Washington Department of Fish & Wildlife untangle a chinook salmon from a net used to transfer it to the King County Research Vessel SoundGuardian in Bellingham, Wash., Friday, Aug. 10, 2018. The salmon are intended to feed an ailing young orca, J50. (Alan Berner/The Seattle Times via AP, Pool)

The young whale is one of just 75 of the fish-eating orcas that frequent the inland waters of Washington state. There hasn't been a successful birth since 2015.

They face nutritional stress over a lack of their preferred food source, Chinook salmon, as well as threats from toxic contamination and vessel noise and disturbances that disrupt their ability to communicate and forage.

Another female orca in the same pod has triggered an international outpouring as she clings to the body of her dead calf that died two weeks ago. Scientists are worried about her and will watch her but don't have plans to help her or remove the calf. She was last seen Thursday still carrying her calf.

The last time scientists rescued a [killer whale](#) in the region was in 2002 when a northern resident killer whale known as Springer was found swimming alone in Puget Sound.

Experts say Springer's case was different because she was isolated. She was moved into a floating net pen and veterinarians assessed her medical condition and treated her. She was fed live salmon in the pen. She returned to her family of [whales](#) in Canada later that year and in 2013 was seen with her new calf.



In this Tuesday, Aug. 7, 2018, Southern Resident killer whale J50 and her mother, J16, swim off the west coast of Vancouver Island near Port Renfrew, B.C. J50 is the sick whale that a team of experts are hoping to save by giving her antibiotics or feeding her live salmon at sea. The experts now have authorization to intervene with medical treatment in both U.S. and Canadian waters once the critically endangered orca shows up again in the inland waters of the Pacific Northwest. (Brian Gisborne/Fisheries and Oceans Canada via AP)

© 2018 The Associated Press. All rights reserved.

Citation: Teams pack boats with fish to prepare to feed ailing orca (2018, August 10) retrieved 22 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2018-08-teams-boats-fish-ailing-orca.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.