

# Conservation group petitions for Alaska king salmon to be listed as an endangered species

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A Washington-based conservation group filed a petition with federal regulators Wednesday, requesting that they list Alaska king salmon as an endangered species.

The Wild Fish Conservancy argued in its 67-page petition that king, or chinook, salmon numbers have declined to the point where the species is at risk of extinction in Alaska. The group cites state data indicating that the decline has been predominately caused by climate change, habit destruction and hatchery salmon competing for food with wild fish.

The group is asking that the National Marine Fisheries Service formally review king salmon numbers across the Gulf of Alaska, the Aleutian Islands and Southeast Alaska before considering stricter protections. Those could include critical habit protections and expanding ways to protect king salmon smolt—among other measures the group lists.

The petition is a first step in a process that could take years to be resolved with court challenges possible. But [legal experts](#) say there could be broad implications if the request is approved to list Alaska king salmon as threatened or endangered under the 1973 Endangered Species Act.

Attorney Anna Crary, a partner at Anchorage law firm Landye Bennett Blumstein, said that determination could potentially curtail commercial fishing for king salmon and affect sport and subsistence fishing as well. There could also be implications for logging and mining, which are described in the petition as threats to critical salmon habitats, she said.

"I would imagine that industry is going to become significantly involved, and that it will be a while before we see those results—if any—of this petition to list," she said.

United Fishermen of Alaska, an industry group representing the [commercial fishing](#) industry, released a statement after the petition was made public. Executive director Tracy Welch said the industry group had not fully reviewed the petition, "But note our concern for potential far-reaching impacts to fisheries across the state if such a listing were to

occur—impacts that are not yet fully understood."

Federal regulators will now have 90 days to conduct an initial review. If that is accepted, regulators would then perform a yearlong study of salmon stocks across the state and make a formal determination whether Alaska king salmon should be listed as an endangered species.

"For decades, scientists have been sounding the alarm that Alaska's Chinook are in dire trouble," said Emma Helverson, executive director of the Wild Fish Conservancy, through a prepared statement. "Despite existing management plans and years of efforts by the state of Alaska, Chinook salmon continue to decline in abundance, size, diversity, and special structure throughout the state."

The petition notes that there have been "significant declines" of king salmon numbers in all Alaska waterways since 2007, referring to state data. Escapement goals at king salmon fisheries across Alaska have also regularly been missed in recent years.

Alaska Department of Fish and Game Commissioner Douglas Vincent-Lang said the state already manages king salmon stocks sustainably and that the [endangered species](#) designation is not necessary. He said that king salmon numbers have declined, but the state has "substantially" invested in research to understand why, and to identify possible solutions.

"We may have some huge concerns but none of the stocks in our eyes are at risk of extinction—now or in the foreseeable future," Vincent-Lang said.

The Wild Fish Conservancy has challenged Alaska's management of king salmon in the past.

The group filed a lawsuit in 2020, arguing that Southeast Alaska's iconic king salmon troll fishery should be closed to protect endangered killer whales in Puget Sound that feed on [chinook salmon](#). A [federal judge](#) in Washington state issued an order that would have shut down the fishery last May.

A federal appeals court issued a last-minute reprieve for Alaska fishermen in June when a "stay" was ordered, allowing the \$85 million fishery to open while the case proceeded. The Wild Fish Conservancy stated later in June that it was planning on asking the federal government to have Alaska king [salmon](#) listed under the Endangered Species Act.

The state has fought against listing other Alaska species as endangered. It successfully campaigned against that designation for wolves in Southeast Alaska and unsuccessfully for bearded seals in northern Alaska.

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